

***“Your Love Keeps Lifting Me”***  
***A Homily by Stephen Martz for the People of St. Nicholas***  
***15 February 2009***  
***2 Kings 5:1-14 + Psalm 30 + 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 + Mark 1:40-45***

Do you know how sometimes when you hear a certain song, you remember exactly where you were or what you were doing the last time you heard it? Recently, while grocery shopping, Dominick’s was playing Jackie Wilson singing “Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher.”

Suddenly – zap – I was back in the cafeteria at Parkland Junior High School. Double-zap and, a few years older, I was driving along Rockville Pike past the radio station WINX, listening on the car radio as their deejay cued it up.

The same thing happens to me sometimes with places. I remember once riding the red line Metra in Washington, my mind drifting off in some inconsequential direction.

Suddenly, as we approached the Rhode Island Avenue station, tears began streaming down my face. I had just remembered another, earlier time I had been on that train in that spot with my friend Sue, who had recently died.

Well, it’s the same with today’s gospel passage. Whenever I hear it, I become 30-something again – I kinda like that -- and it’s the mid-1980s – I’m not sure I like that. I’m in a Roman Catholic religious community and studying at Catholic Theological Union...And my work with the AIDS Pastoral Care Network, which I co-founded in 1985, also comes flooding back into my mind.

This was a bedrock passage for me in those days. I used this gospel when I taught at in-service trainings or other settings. I wrote about it in more than one seminary course. And it always reminds me of my friend John, who developed the AIDS-related cancer, Kaposi’s sarcoma.

I had been assigned to be John's "buddy" while he died, but I became his friend – and he mine -- during his last six months. I will never forget how the KS marked him as a "leper" whenever he ventured out, how the very sight of him aroused in strangers pity, fear, and sometimes hostility.

That was then, this is now.

Still this gospel grabs me and shakes my emotions; makes me feel as if I am right *there* with the leper and Jesus. It's a simple yet profound story. On the human side, it is about humility.

If we'd never met Naaman, we'd think it pretty hard to be a leper and not be humble. Even though biblical leprosy carried symbolic meaning which we, millennia later, can scarcely grasp, we grasp enough.

When the king of Israel despairs in the first reading, "Am I God, to give life or death?" his response is not mere hyperbole. Leprosy was a living death that forced the afflicted to sever ties with family, friends, and the entire community.

When Elisha sends Naaman to wash in the Jordan – and the proud warrior finally consents – this man of God does what the king could not: he symbolically restores Naaman to life.

By the way, as the story continues beyond what we read today, Naaman's pride dissolves, and he becomes a follower of the god of Israel. Thus, both of today's healing stories ultimately are grounded in humility.

Healthy humility is always connected with the ability to see things as they really are. It is particularly linked to the capacity to recognize the Divine **and** our deep human need for the Divine.

Naaman is a bit of a late bloomer in the humility department. *A great man in high favor* with the king, he – like most great persons in high favor with the powerful and privileged – is blind to the depth of his need.

But he's exceptionally fortunate because those close to him -- first the Israelite slave girl, then his servants -- are neither as great nor as blind as he is. Only when the miracle occurs and *his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy*, does Naaman see things as they really are, recognizing his own tremendous need for God's mercy and eventually declaring *there is no God in all the earth except in Israel*.

If Naaman is a late bloomer, the leper of Mark's gospel is a precocious overachiever when it comes to humility. He approaches Jesus *begging*. He *kneels* before the Master. Most importantly, he says, *If you choose, you can make me clean*.

With those words, we understand that he -- this marginal outcast, pushed away from family and friends because he is "defiled" and "unclean," -- has achieved something the great religious people of his time struggled and mostly failed to achieve.

He has recognized Jesus for who and what he truly is: the son of God.

Again, healthy humility allows us to see things as they really are. Spiritually, humility permits us to recognize and celebrate that we are marvelously made, while at the same time giving us courage to see as well that, marvelous and wonderful as we are, we are creature, not Creator.

We need something and someone beyond ourselves to heal us and make us whole. We need. The leper knows this deep in his heart and so approaches Jesus and asks for what he most needs. *If you choose, you can make me clean*.

What makes this story timeless and gives it surpassing power is what happens next. First, Jesus is *MOVED with pity*. Our translation says *moved with pity* but others have *moved with compassion* or *moved with anger*. Whatever translation one prefers, what is absolutely apparent is that Jesus is shaken by the man's plight and responds from the heart.

We know this because the next thing we are told is that Jesus stretched out his hand and *touched* the leper -- something few people of his time would have done because the moment clean flesh meets unclean flesh, Jesus himself is ritually defiled.

The one who will lay down his life for his friends breaks the boundary that separates clean and unclean, in and out, God and humanity.

Finally, echoing the man's request, Jesus answers: *I do choose. Be made clean!* At that moment unclean yet Divine, Jesus responds to the forces of darkness and evil and suffering with an unequivocal No! No! No!

If, from a human perspective, this story is about humility, from the Divine side, it is about Love. Love so high so deep so broad so wide, so unsurpassably strong, that we can hardly imagine it. Love fused with Divine anger at everything that diminishes our glory as human beings.

The Love Jesus has for the leper is the same heartfelt Love he has for you and for me. It is Love that surpasses human understanding, yet Love we seek to accept and then to embody in our relations with one another. It is Love that keeps lifting us higher and higher...

*End with a portion of the Jackie Wilson song...*

*Your Love, Lifting Me Higher  
Than I've Ever Been Lifted Before*

*So Keep It Up, Quench My Desire  
And I'll Be At Your Side Forevermore*

*You Know Your Love (Your Love Keeps Lifting Me)  
Keeps On Lifting (Your Love Keeps Lifting Me)  
Higher (Lifting Me, Lifting Me), Higher, And Higher (Higher)  
I Said Your Love (Your Love Keeps Lifting Me)  
Keeps On (Lifting Me, Lifting Me)  
Lifting Me (Lifting Me) Higher And Higher (Higher)*

*Now Once I Was Downhearted  
Disappointment Was My Closest Friend  
But Then You Came And He Soon Departed  
And You Know He Never Showed His Face Again*

*That's Why Your Love (Your Love Keeps Lifting Me)  
Keeps On Lifting (Your Love Keeps Lifting Me)  
Higher (Lifting Me, Lifting Me), Higher, And Higher (Higher)*

*I Said Your Love (Your Love Keeps Lifting Me)  
Keeps On (Lifting Me, Lifting Me)  
Lifting Me (Lifting Me) Higher And Higher (Higher)*

*Awww*

*Music fades during music that follows this stanza and ends before next verse*