

28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

2 Kings 5: 14-17

Psalm 98: 1, 2-3, 3-4

2 Timothy 2: 8-13

Luke 17: 11-19

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I am a member of the Congregation of Holy Cross, the religious order that founded the University of Portland. Before taking his first vows, every Holy Cross religious undergoes a year of intense spiritual training called the Novitiate Year. Our novitiate takes place in a big house on a large property in the foothills of Pikes Peak in Colorado. I made my own novitiate there about thirty years ago. In those days, as is still the case today, periods of manual labor formed an important part of our weekly routine. Brother Ken was the novitiate staff member in charge of these outdoor work periods. The only way to get excused from a work period was to sign up to cook dinner that day. One of my fellow novices, who apparently had an aversion to hard manual labor, managed, time and again, to sign up to cook on days when a work period was scheduled. Finally, however, someone got to the sign-up sheet before him, so he was forced to go outdoors with the rest. As it happened, that day the work crew was going to a local horse farm to shovel manure into our pick up truck for use in our garden. I imagine it gave Brother Ken a certain amount of pleasure to hand my work-shy classmate a spade, and to tell him to start shoveling. Having no alternative, he tramped out into the shin-deep muck, and got to work. When the job was done, and he tried to walk back out of the stable yard, his shoes were sucked off his feet

and lost in the muck forever. He rode home to the novitiate in his stocking feet.

Both literally and metaphorically, this experience was very appropriate to a year of spiritual boot camp in the Christian tradition, because Christianity isn't some abstract otherworldly ivory tower faith. On the contrary, the practice of Christianity requires that we get our hands dirty – that we dig into the muck of human existence.

This is hinted at in our first reading. When Naaman the Syrian is healed by the God of Israel, he asks Elisha for two mule loads of earth to take back with him to his homeland. It's as if he knows he needs a lot of dirt to worship God properly.

In our second reading, Paul talks of the eternal glory offered to us in Christ, but he does so only in the context of his own very real, practical, earthly suffering, “even to the point of chains like a criminal.” And he reminds us that we will live and reign with Christ only if we have died with him. And, of course our Lord was not resurrected until he had died and was buried in the earth.

In ancient Israel lepers were regarded as unclean. To touch a leper was to be defiled. In our Gospel, Jesus heals ten lepers. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus touches a leper to heal him. (See Mt 8:3)

This “hands on” quality of Christianity is ultimately rooted in the Incarnation: “The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14) Christianity is sometimes criticized as being pre-occupied with abstract spiritual teachings at the expense of real engagement with the world. Our readings today show this criticism to be misdirected. In fact, it is our everyday lives that are becoming increasingly abstracted from ordinary, material reality, and real suffering. Supermarkets process our food,

funeral homes look after our dead, our relationships are increasingly “virtual,” the suffering of other human beings is distilled for us into antiseptic statistics, and we are urged to carefully sanitize our hands every time we’ve touched another human being.

It is our *faith* that compels us to get our hands dirty – to get stuck into the muck of other peoples’ lives – to feel their pain and try to ease their burdens – to be willing to give our attention, our time, our lives for the life of the world. If our nails are clean, we’re doing it wrong.