

## WHAT PREVENTS MY BEING GRATEFUL?

Some interesting notes on the subject of breathing: It is widely reported that, a person at rest takes about 16 breaths per minute. This means we breathe about 960 breaths an hour, 23,000 breaths a day, 8,400,000 breaths in a year. 634,000,000 breaths in my lifetime. 600 million times I have taken a breath and breathed out. 600 million!

And some interesting notes on the subject of heartbeats: A pulse of 72 heartbeats per minute in an adult is common. 4320 heartbeats an hour. 104,000 heartbeats per day. 38,000,000 heartbeats per year. How old are you? I am 75 1/2. In my lifetime my heart has pumped 2.86 trillion times. 2.8 TRILLION times my heart has beaten, each moment, every moment.

These little factoids really caught my attention. I had no idea. But here is what came to me after a short reflection. I cannot remember thanking God for the breathing that I rely upon to live here on earth. I do not remember thanking God for keeping my heartbeat going all those days, all those times. I like to think that I have a grateful heart in me, that there are many things for which I am grateful. But it occurred to me that I actually have many, many more things to be grateful for than I am aware of.

The readings for this Sunday are about gratitude. The ten lepers that Jesus cures. The second letter of Paul to Timothy where he encourages his young apostle to be grateful to God for the gifts he has been endowed with and the opportunities to serve. And then the reading from the Second Book of Kings. The portion of the text that was read this morning was just a snippet of the text. The whole story is quite fascinating and with a thoroughly human touch to it.

Naaman was a famous general for the country of Syria which still exists today. But this is twenty-six hundred years ago. Syria was a country next door to Israel. Sometimes the two countries got along well. Sometimes they were wary adversaries. Sometimes they went to war against each other. This is one of those wary times. Not a lot of trust. Naaman has leprosy and no one in Syria is able to help him or cure him. He is despondent. His wife has a young servant girl who was captured from a little town in Israel. When the servant girl learns that Naaman has leprosy and no one can help him, she says to her mistress that he should go to prophet in Israel because he could cure him.

This word is passed on and suddenly hope is rekindled. Naaman goes to his king and asks for a letter of introduction to the king of Israel. The king of Syria prepares many grand gifts—gold and tapestries and food to be presented to the king of Israel in gratitude for healing his general. Only problem is, the king of Israel knows nothing of the servant girl's promise of a cure. He gets the letter and immediately interprets it as a ruse to start a fight. He is very upset and does not know what to do.

Now the prophet Elisha who succeeded the prophet Elijah, is in a little hut. He gets word about the king's dilemma. He sends word to the king that he should send the general to him. The king is only too happy to oblige. Now when Naaman is informed he is to go to the prophet, he is overjoyed. He has dreamt of the moment when they meet. The prophet will come out in a grand show of deference and pronounce Naaman cured and in dramatic fashion this will be accomplished. And all will live happily ever after.

Problem is that when Naaman gets to Elisha's hut, Elisha doesn't even go out to him. He simply sends word that Naaman is to go and bathe in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman is not amused. He feels slighted the prophet wouldn't even come out to greet him. Doesn't he know who I am, he thinks. He is very put off. AND. He has seen this Jordan River and it is not a particularly impressive river nor particularly clean. And the general thinks that he has way better rivers back in Syria. No thanks. Not bathing here.

But once again one his servants pleads with him. If the prophet had asked you to do something dramatic or way over the top you would have done it. Even if it was difficult and costly. What's more,

why not do a simple thing the prophet asks? Reluctantly the general disembarks and takes off his clothes and bathes seven times in the Jordan River. What happens? That is where today's reading picks up. It says that the general's skin became like that of a baby. CURED! In the least likely and murky waters of the Jordan River, God's healing power is at work.

My friends this story is not so much about Naaman the Syrian general and his bout with leprosy, as it is about the human condition, damaged and diseased by our sin. And the power of our God (the One whose Word Elisha speaks to the General), to save us from all that sickens us and corrupts. In the very Jordan where many years later John will baptize so many Israelites and Jesus himself will bring the Holy Spirit to the very waters of baptism.

But just for a moment look at the General's attitude, his own expectations get in the way. And that happens often enough in our own lives too. We build up certain expectations and when things do not pan out the way we expect we are crestfallen. We go away sad. But the servant who speaks up to the general pierces through these expectations. But notice something else. The General is cynical. He looks down on the Israelite prophet. He rolls his eyes at bathing in the Israelite river. It is his own cynicism that prevents him from being healed, from doing the very things that will truly liberate him and set him free.

Cynicism, sarcasm, a snarky attitude. We are all familiar with these things. They do not serve us well as human beings. None of those things is Christ's way or in any way in harmony with Christ's way. Each of these things works against human relationship and good health. And each of these things prevents us from becoming grateful, and from acting in a grateful way. In the end the General is grateful and tries to offer all his gifts to the prophet who has no interest. A simple thank you to God will suffice.

My friends, cynicism is an obstacle to our developing a grateful heart. We have to decide that such an attitude must be turned over to Our Lord and removed by him from our hearts. Sarcasm and snarkiness too. Only gratitude opens us to the power of Christ's healing and forgiveness. That is why the Lord invites us here in Eucharist. We have many, many things for which we are to be thankful. And this gratitude opens the gates of the grace of God in our lives.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.