

What's on your "Bucket List?" You might remember the movie, where Morgan Freedman plays a man with a chronic illness and Jack Nicolson is a wealthy executive. They fly around the world together fulfilling bucket list items. The purpose of the bucket list is to look at the BIG PICTURE of our lives and identify the important things so we can tackle them first. It's like taking a college entrance exam and jumping ahead to problems we know we can do before time runs out. God also has a bucket list for our lives, and as we see in today's readings, his focus is keeping us on a path to heaven.

I want to start with a little back story on the first reading. Naaman is a great army general and good friends with the king. Naaman has all he needs, the only thing on HIS bucket list is to be healed of his leprosy. GOD's bucket list for Naaman, however, includes the virtue of humility and a relationship with God.

An Israelite slave girl tells Naaman's wife about the prophet Elisha, who has the gift of healing and can cure Naaman's leprosy. So, Naaman travels to Samaria to see Elisha, but according to Jewish law, Elisha avoids contact with the leprous man and sends a messenger to the door instead. The messenger tells Naaman to go and wash in the Jordan River, seven times, and he will be healed. Naaman's NOT used to being treated this way, he expects Elisha to come out and cure him without delay. As a result, Naaman is angry and is ready to abort the mission and head home in failure.

The reality is, Commander Naaman is being asked to make a great leap of FAITH. He is to strip off his uniform in front of his army colleagues, exposing the full extent of his disease, then plunge, with his open sores, into the muddy water of the Jordan, where the common people bathe and wash their clothes. All the while he would be hoping, through his seven dunkings, that a God, he knows nothing about, will heal him, and keep him from looking foolish in front of the king and everyone else in his kingdom.

They say the best way to learn humility is to be humiliated. And so, after discussing the matter with his servants, Naaman swallows his pride. He makes the journey to the Jordan River, strips down, cleanses himself seven times, and is healed. As a bonus, his flesh becomes like that of a little child. Naaman's heart also becomes like that of a little child, and he opens up to the Lord in gratitude.

He says to Elisha, "Now I know that there is NO God in ALL the earth, except in Israel." When Naaman offers a gift of gold to Elisha, Elisha refuses it, since it was God, not Elisha who cured the man, and God requires no repayment.

Naaman, responds by asking permission to take a PIECE of Israel back with him in the form of two mule-loads of earth. This allows him to worship the God of Israel from HIS own country.

I mentioned that God's bucket list for Naaman included humility and a relationship with God. Well, the word "humility" is derived from the word "humus" which means earth or soil. So, you could say that Naaman is physically taking home "humility" that day, the earth that will serve to connect him with God going forward. It's the abiding relationship with God that keeps Naaman grounded and more likely to maintain his humility. We see from Naaman's experience, that life is a process of pursuing OUR bucket list only to find out that GOD's bucket list has much more to offer.

The ten lepers in today's gospel are bringing their bucket lists to the Lord as well. Unlike Naaman, they have many items in their bucket lists as the poorest of the poor in the Jewish society. They are considered not only physically, but spiritually unclean and are referred to as the "walking dead." All their desires hinge on their top bucket list item, the healing of leprosy which allows for a return to communal life. God's bucket list for them is short, asking only for gratitude after Jesus heals them. We see from the story that only one leper returns to Jesus with gratitude. You can imagine the others are too consumed with their good fortune and busy returning to their communities.

Jesus tells the Samaritan leper, "Your faith has saved you." This implies that the other lepers, though physically healed, were not saved. Though they had FAITH in the power of God, they lacked the willingness to surrender to the WILL of God.

We are all like Naaman and the ten lepers, a sum of our talents and flaws, personality traits and life experiences. Whether our bucket list is short like Naaman's or lengthy like the ten lepers, God loves us individually and intercedes with his bucket list to guide us to eternal life.

When we seek God's will, we combine our bucket list with His and find the truly important things in life. Like Naaman, we begin with a leap of faith, and like the 10 lepers we call out to the Lord with our needs. Next, we need to find the courage to journey outside our comfort zones to pursue God's will. With God's grace, we will develop an abiding relationship with Jesus, as our Lord and savior, and he will bring us home to his Father.