Luke 17:11-19

It's a Two Way Street

10/12/2025

When was the last time you were too sick to be around other people? As cold and flu season approaches, we will be encouraged to stay home if we're contagious so that we don't infect friends and co-workers. If we're thoughtful and wise, we'll abide by this recommendation. And of course, it has been all that long since we were required to isolate during COVID. Do you remember those days? We couldn't wait until churches and schools reopened and we couldn't wait to hug our family members and friends again.

The thing about COVID was we expected the lock down to be temporary. In Jesus' day, and for hundreds of years after, many families weren't so fortunate. You see, if you were diagnosed with leprosy – which was the term for a variety of contagious skin ailments - you had to live in total isolation –you couldn't go to work or worship, you couldn't go to the market or enjoy

community events. You would even be banished from your home, from the loving touch of your spouse, or your children, or your parents. And it had no cure, it was a permanent banishment from life as you knew it. Healthy people were so afraid of leprosy that if you were afflicted and someone started to come near you, you had to cry out "Unclean, unclean!" to warn people to keep their distance. It's no wonder that lepers banded together – it was the only way they could have any human contact at all.

In today's text, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee. All of a sudden, ten lepers come as close as they are allowed and call out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." These folks who were allowed no contact with the community knew about Jesus – I suspect that word of someone who could heal them of this dreaded disease had spread like wildfire through the leper colonies. Can you imagine how they must have felt that day as they went to seek out Jesus – did they dare hope that he might intervene on their behalf? Did they dare believe that they

had to chance to be well again, to be able to go home and hold their families close, to return to work, to have a life? "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." (PAUSE)

Jesus' response seems strange to us, doesn't it? "Go and show yourselves to the priests," he said. That was it. No touch of his hand, no prayer, no words of blessing. Just a simple instruction, "Go and show yourselves to the priest." To our ears, it might have made a bit more sense if Jesus had said, "Go and show yourselves to the doctor." Why the priests? In those days, in addition to being contagious, leprosy made you ritually unclean. It was the priests who were the ones who had the power to declare that you were clean, that you had been cured of the disease and that you were allowed to re-enter society. Once you believed your condition had cleared up, going to the priest was the first of several steps you had to take to re-enter society.

If I had been one of the lepers that day, I would have been confused. Why should we go show ourselves to the priests? Jesus hasn't done anything for us – we don't need the priests to tell us that we're sick – we know

that. If it had been me, I may have turned dejectedly and headed back to the leper colony, thinking well, it was a nice try.

But apparently these men with leprosy had faith. Maybe they knew the story of Namaan, the Aramean soldier in II Kings who had leprosy. When Namaan appeared before Elisha, Elisha instructed him to go wash in the Jordan River 7 times. If you know this story, you know that Namaan was enraged at Elisha's instructions. He couldn't believe that he travelled all of that way to be told by some prophet to wash 7 times in the dirty Jordan River. As Namaan was walking away he said, "Surely for me the prophet would come out and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the leprosy. There are cleaner rivers at home I could have washed in." As Namaan began to stalk away, one of his servants said, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult would you not have done it? How much more then, when all he said to you was 'wash and be clean'?" Namaan wisely reconsidered, washed

himself seven times in the Jordan, and found that he was healed.

Did Namaan's story help the ten lepers in today's text have faith? We can't know for sure. What we do know is that **as** they were going, they were healed. They didn't get healed and then go to find the priests. It was as they were obeying Jesus' instructions, as they started on the journey in faith, it was then and only then that they were healed.

Throughout Scripture, we often see God healing in unusual and unexpected ways. But how often do we have preconceived notions about how God should act and how difficult that might be? How often do we miss God's activity in our lives because we want to see something happen before we respond or obey? (PAUSE)

Can you imagine being among the lepers that were walking down the road toward the temple that day? All of a sudden you begin to regain feeling in your fingers, to see a healthy glow return to your pasty white skin. Hands that moments before could barely stand the weight of clothing are now smacking high fives. There is

hugging and rejoicing and cries of joy! We're going home! Can you see them breaking into a run as they rushed toward the temple in Jerusalem to get a clean bill of health from the priests? (PAUSE)

Then, all of a sudden, one man turns back, praising God with a loud voice. Seeing Jesus, he throws himself at Jesus' feet, thanking him. Often we hear this text around Thanksgiving, and we're encouraged to be like the one who returned to Jesus. Often we're warned, explicitly or implicitly, not to be like the nine who went on their way.

But I have a problem with that line of thinking, don't you? I think the nine get a bum rap. After all, weren't they doing exactly what Jesus had told them to do? They were going to show themselves to the priests. They weren't even healed until after they had begun to follow his instructions. How can we fault them for continuing on? In fact, I might have been afraid to turn back – what if I didn't follow Jesus' instructions exactly? Would the healing be rescinded? If I get distracted or waylaid, would the disease return? "Let's stay on

course," I can hear them saying. And who would blame them? Once they were healed, Jesus' command to go to the priests made perfect sense. He was following the well-known guidelines of the Jewish faith. He was following their time honored traditions. They did what they were told and they got what they asked for: they were healed of their disease. (PAUSE)

All except for one. Why did he turn back? I suspect that all ten were more than grateful as they followed Jesus instructions. Why would one turn back? The text makes it clear that Jesus was pleased when the one recovering leper returned to offer his praise and thanks. In fact, Jesus questions the man about the other nine, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" But if we take a closer look, there is a lot more going on here than returning thanks. (PAUSE)

What is the one thing that the text tells us about the man who returned? (PAUSE) He is a Samaritan.

What difference does that make? You may remember how important the history is here. You may remember how the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms – the northern kingdom known as Israel and the southern kingdom known as Judah, and the bad blood that developed between the two nations over time.

The temple, where Jesus sent the lepers to find the priests, was located in the Southern kingdom, in Jerusalem. After the split, the Jews in the northern kingdom were no longer able to worship in Jerusalem, so they built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim.

The Jews in the Southern kingdom came to despise their Northern counterparts. First, the Southern Jews did not believe that Israel's worship at the temple on Mt. Gerizim was legitimate. Offering God sacrifices and performing other rituals any place besides Jerusalem was unthinkable, it.

When the Jews in the Southern Kingdom were conquered by the Babylonians, many of the Jews were deported to Babylon – where they believed they were being punished by God for their unfaithfulness. During

their captivity in Babylon, they recommitted themselves to Yahweh and pledged to be faithful to their God and to their culture. They closed ranks around themselves to keep their blood line and their traditions pure. They would not be like the despicable Samaritans who had inter-married with the indigenous people who did not worship Yahweh.

Eventually, the Jews in Babylon were allowed to return home and they were given permission to rebuild their temple. The Samaritans in the northern kingdom offered to help with the reconstruction. But the pure bloods refused, they would have no association with these outcasts. They couldn't stand the thought of socializing with or working alongside Samaritans.

In light of all of this bad blood, is it any wonder the Samaritan leper turned around? To him Jesus' instructions didn't make sense. Why would Jesus send him to the temple in Jerusalem? It wasn't where he was used to worshipping, and he likely wouldn't be welcomed there. Even if the priest was willing to declare

him clean, he would not be welcomed into that community. (PAUSE)

Several things interest me about how this story unfolds. We might expect the Samaritan to ask Jesus for permission to show himself to the priest at Mt. Gerizim – his place of worship - but that's not what happens at all.

Instead, the Samaritan worships Jesus. He falls at Jesus' feet and praises God, right there in the middle of the road. It seems like once again it is the outcast who understands – it's not where we worship that's important – it's who. It is the outcast who gets it. It is the Samaritan, the marginalized one, who once again teaches those of who live in the mainstream.

The other thing that catches my eye is Jesus' last statement to the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way for your faith has made you well." This phrase can also be translated, "You faith has saved you." In fact, in other healing stories in Luke, he uses a different word to describe the healing than he does here. Many scholars believe that Luke is making a distinction between physical healing – as important as that is – and the multi-

faceted, multi-layered transformation of the whole person. The Samaritan leper who returns to offer thanksgiving and worship finds himself healed and restored in body **and** in spirit. He finds himself restored to his community and to God!

As I was writing today's sermon, I kept thinking about the guests who come to the shelter where we serve dinner every month and to our neighbors who receive food we help pack at the food bank. They aren't suffering from leprosy and we can't offer them miraculous physical healing, but we will have the opportunity to minister to their physical needs. As we joyfully engage in these ministries, I hope that we will all be in tune to how we might also offer ways for them to experience deeper transformation and wholeness as well.

One important way that we can do this is to view our interactions as a reciprocal opportunity. Instead of focusing solely on what we are providing them, I challenge us to be open to all that they have to teach and offer us. Just like the Samaritan in today's text, our guests and those we meet on the street view the world

much differently than we do. Take time to slow down and learn someone's story, listen with an open heart and mind to a differing perspective and ask yourself what God might be teaching you through it.

If we do this, I have a feeling that instead of going on our merry way and working through the institutional structures that are familiar and beneficial to us, we might come back and worship Jesus with fresh eyes and a new perspective as well, because healing is a two-way street.

Having opened your hearts to God and received God's healing love, go now into this hurting troubled world with the good news of God's presence and compassion. AMEN.