

## **I Don't Want to be Rash....**

[Text - Luke 17:11-19]

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In Jesus' day there were a great number of strict rules for dealing with *leprosy*. These rules covered a wide variety of skin conditions, blemishes, and rashes - and not just what we today identify as "Hansen's Disease." Ancient Hebrew Law decreed that anyone with any kind of "leprosy" had to keep-away from others; and if others came near them, the "lepers" were required to shout-out, "Unclean! unclean!" so that the "clean" people could stay back! Fortunately, if the skin condition cleared-up, the local priest could put that person through a strict, 8-day cleansing ritual, and then officially pronounce that "leper" as being "cured".

Unfortunately, however, since it was often assumed that the "leper" was being punished for some evil he or she had done, many of them were still shunned even after their condition was cleared-up. [And I thought my teenage acne was an appalling problem! Clearly, a dab of Clearasil beats having to slaughter a bird and shave my eyebrows!]

In this morning's New Testament reading, as Jesus travels between Samaria and Galilee, he's met by ten people with leprosy who stand at a safe distance and cry out, "Jesus, have mercy on us!" He says to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they go, they are cleansed of their leprosy. Nine of those who are cleansed, obediently continue on their way to see the priest. After all, that's what Jesus told them to do; and that's what the religious law required of them. However, one of those ten chooses to *disobey*! He not only circumvents the system, he also disregards a specific directive from Jesus Christ himself! This grateful individual returns to give heartfelt thanks to the One who helped restore him to health. And by doing so, this social pariah and religious outcast receives a double-dose of

affirmation from Jesus: “Get up and go on your way. *Your faith* has [not only made you well, but has] made you *whole!*”

There are definitely times in Life, when it’s easier to follow a strict set of words lifted from Scripture, rather than striving to be faithful to the *Living Word* revealed through Jesus Christ. It’s certainly simpler to regurgitate the prescribed answers of conventional wisdom, than to prayerfully wrestle with the deeper wisdom of the Divine Mystery. It’s much safer to fall-back on pat answers pulled from the Holy Bible, than to be pulled into a dynamic relationship with the Holy One - the One who challenges us to love “with all our heart, soul, strength, *and mind!*”

Healthy *relationships*, whether they be with other people or with Holy One, challenge us to think, to learn, to grow - to become a better person. Hard-set *rules*, on the other hand, require only our blind obedience. Yet the deceptive danger of unquestioning obedience, is that it often leads to an unbending fundamentalism. *Fundamentalism* - be it Jewish, Islamic, or Christian - says to people: “Follow these specific rules; and make *sure* that everybody else does the same!” Fundamentalism fashions a god that is small enough to be contained in a book; yet, somehow, powerful enough to tell everyone exactly what they should or shouldn’t do. Fundamentally, fundamentalism takes the fun and the freedom out of one’s faith; replacing them with a dreary and inflexible hardheartedness. It encourages people to blindly obey passages cherry-picked from Scripture, rather than seeking to understand the context and the genuine Spirit *behind* those words. That’s is what the man who returns to give thanks to Jesus is looking to do. He seeks a deeper understanding and a closer connection with this amazing person who has changed his life.

I think it’s interesting, how at the beginning of this encounter, all ten lepers keep a safe distance from Jesus. None of them presume to break the social stigma surrounding their affliction.

Yet when this Samaritan returns, he not only comes close, he literally throws himself at Jesus' feet; quite likely *touching* him, even though he hasn't begun that complex cleansing ritual! It's as though an added benefit of this remarkable healing, is the breaking of a formidable social barrier - helping this individual move from a profound feeling of isolation, into a deep sense of intimacy with his newfound redeemer and friend. Most likely, the Samaritan doesn't come back just because he feels obliged to say "thank you"; but because of a deep desire to get to know this fantastic individual, Jesus Christ.

I also think it's interesting to speculate about what happens to this man who returns. Jesus tells him to "get-up and go on his way"; however, Jesus had earlier told him to "go and show himself to the priest" - which he didn't do. As soon as he realized that Jesus had imparted to him a Divine healing, he responded with profound gratitude and thanksgiving. So maybe, when he's told to "go on *his way*", the "way" he chooses, is to follow the Way of Jesus Christ. Of course you and I don't know what he does; but we can certainly consider what we might do today.

Throughout our Life's journey, you and I are free to "get-up and go on our way." We *could* choose the way of blind obedience - simply following the rules of religious or social conformity. Or we can listen to our hearts, and to the heart of Divine Love - which calls us beyond mere obedience, into genuine *faithfulness*:

A faithfulness that will challenge the rules, in order to champion those less fortunate;

A faithfulness that is willing to walk-with those people who religion and society often cast aside;

A faithfulness that takes-on the hard work of thoughtfully and prayerfully wrestling with Life's complex problems and issues;

A faithfulness which follows the call to "Love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind; *and* to love our neighbor as ourselves."

According to Jesus, this is the kind of faithfulness that not only *heals* us, but which also makes us *whole* and set us *free*!