

10% Thankful

October 13, 2019

Luke 17:11-19

I think there must have been some Canadians on the committee that chose our lectionary text for today, because tomorrow, Columbus Day, is Canadian Thanksgiving and I'm going to be celebrating over in Middleburg Heights after service today. So I thank them for that.

Okay, so there was once a little boy who was climbing in a tree. As he climbed, he slipped and started to fall and he called out, "God, save me!"

Just at that moment, his pants caught on a branch and he was able to steady himself. And then, he called out again, "Never mind, God, my pants caught on this branch!"

It's kind of a dad joke, but I've always liked it because there's some truth in it. When we are in need, it's just natural to call out to God. But if God answers, we are all too ready to go on our way without a second thought.

It's kind of that way with the group of ten lepers who met Jesus on the road as he was on his way through Samaria to Jerusalem from Galilee. I would prefer to say *ten people who were suffering from leprosy* met Jesus on the road, because they were more than their disease, but I won't for one important reason: historically, people who were suffering from leprosy *were* defined medically and socially by their disease to an extent that is hard for us to comprehend today.

So I'll still use the Biblical word *leper* to represent someone trapped in the social identity forced on them just because they had this horrible disease, but when I do, know that I mean a real, living, breathing, wonderful person made in God's image and loved by family and friends, who happened to have come down with a dread disease.

It's hard for us to imagine what life was like for those lepers. Leprosy was a mystery back then. People called lepers weren't necessarily suffering from

what we call Hansen's Disease today, which is genuine leprosy.

Instead, a jumble of different skin diseases were all lumped into one name, leprosy, and one treatment, which was exile from the community. Better safe than sorry was the motto for dealing with skin diseases.

Leprosy itself was so terrifying that no one wanted to take any chances. The closest modern analogy I can think of to the fear leprosy caused was how scared people were of AIDS back in the 80's, where finding out that someone had AIDS meant that many people went scurrying away and friends stopped calling. It often meant you were a social outcast as well as a person suffering from a terrible disease.

Unfortunately, true leprosy richly deserves that fear. What leprosy does is numb your body parts. It doesn't actually cause you to lose body parts directly. What happens is that you get a small cut or a puncture and you don't notice it because you don't feel it. That part of your body is numb.

And you keep on not noticing it while it gets infected, and not noticing when it turns gangrenous, and then it is too late to do anything about it and your finger is gone, or your ear, or your nose or your foot. Groups of lepers check each other from head to toe each evening, looking for cuts or scrapes that could turn into a disaster for someone.

A person suffering with leprosy wishes with all their heart that they could feel pain, and is thankful for their body parts which still hurt when they get cut or injured. Even pain can sometimes be something we should be thankful for!

I remember when I was in Thailand I went with one of the missionaries to meet a group of lepers who were Christians. The Christian missionaries were the only people in south Thailand who would have anything to do with lepers, and literally all the Christians in south Thailand when I was there in 1984 were lepers, except for one man. I'll tell you about him in a minute.

But we drove out of town to this clearing by the side of the highway. And there, about a hundred feet back in the bush, were these lean-tos made of sticks and a bunch of people living in them cooking around a smoky open fire.

These lepers had been treated for the disease and were no longer contagious,

but no one in their home communities believed it, so they continued to be isolated, and had to live here outside of town in the woods.

I was introduced to one man who stuck out his hand for me to shake. He had only one finger left on it.

Inside I was terrified in spite of what I knew. But outside I smiled and quickly held out my hand to shake his. I hoped he hadn't noticed the momentary hesitation as I overcame my fear, and said to myself, "This is a Christian brother, and a real person, and you're going to shake his hand right now."

Later in life I learned that St. Francis of Assisi was terrified of getting leprosy, and so, naturally, he felt called to work with lepers for much of his life, which he did. He never got the disease himself.

Now back to our story of Jesus. Jesus is on the road on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem, going through Samaria, and he meets these men with leprosy. They aren't in a town because they can't be. They're outcasts, like the people I met in the woods off the highway.

Normally they would have to call out to passers-by that they had leprosy, so that no one would get too near them. To all whom they met, they had to announce their disease: "Leper! Leper! Leper!"

You can see how their disease defined them, where they lived and who they were. They ceased being whole people, and became just their disease. Who were they? Lepers. Not John or Peter or Andrew or Simeon. But "Leper, leper, leper!"

They called out to Jesus, as they had called out so many times before to passers-by, and they asked for mercy. This was a common cry for charity. If you can't go into town, and no one will touch what you have touched, then you can't earn your keep, and you live by the whim and generosity of others.

You couldn't even go to the synagogue to ask for help because leprosy made you ritually unclean, and no one wanted you near them in case your disease defiled them somehow, and they couldn't pray to God in a holy place. These men were truly socially dead.

Anyway, the ten seem to have heard of Jesus before, and the text says they approached him while keeping their distance. There it is again, that even when they draw near to someone, they still have to keep their distance. There is a huge gulf that separates them from normal life.

They must have had hopes that he might heal them, that he had some power to do so. Jesus had healed other lepers, and I'm sure the word got out.

That's why they call Jesus "master", indicating that they are willing to do whatever he tells them to do in order to be healed. And Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests.

Unlike in south Thailand, in ancient Israel you could get out of leprosy jail if a priest certified that you were cured. Once that happened, you could resume normal life.

So when Jesus tells them to go to the priest, they know exactly what that means: they are going to be healed, certified by the priest, and freed to resume normal life. They aren't healed yet, but it's going to happen if they do what Jesus told them to do.

It's only on the way, they realize that they have all been healed.

But only one of them goes back to say thank you to Jesus for what Jesus has done for him. The others don't, and I'm sure they had their reasons.

Maybe one of the lepers didn't go back because he thought to himself, "Wow, that new lotion is really starting to work. I didn't need Jesus' help after all." His pants caught on a branch, in other words.

Or another might have thought, "Jesus said to go to a priest, and I'm going to a priest. I'm going to do exactly what Jesus said, in case it comes back. After the priest, I'll maybe go look for Jesus." His desire to follow what Jesus said to the letter makes him not go back. He gets so caught up in the minute details and legalities of what Jesus said that he doesn't experience any of the joy of being healed.

Maybe a third thought, "Oh, look, the sunlight is making me better. I should have gotten out on the street sooner." This man found another explanation

that suited him. He decided that he didn't need to worry about God or Jesus after all.

Or a fourth said to himself, "Oh, wow, I'm getting healed. I need to get away from these other lepers right away. I can't afford to risk going back with them to say thanks." Our fourth friend let fear of others keep him from going back to Jesus. Some people are afraid to hang out with Jesus because so many people around him have problems. But, of course, that's like not going to the doctor because there are so many sick people there! If you need him, that's where you go!

Maybe a fifth thought, "I better head to the priest before this wears off. Getting certified clean is the most important thing. I'll worry about thanks later." This man considers the whole thing nothing but lucky magic, and not a sign of the grace of God. And magic, unlike God's grace, can wear off. God's grace isn't magic, and it doesn't wear out: it's there, it's constant, and it covers you, embraces you, and lifts you up.

And a sixth decided, "I'm healed, and I'm going straight to my wife and children. I've really missed them, and I can't wait to see them. Jesus will understand." Understandably, this man wants to go back to his family and his old life as soon as he can. As soon as things are normal again, he forgets all about Jesus. Oh how often this happens! An answer comes, and we forget that we ever asked for anything.

Maybe the seventh reflected, "I need to go find someone to hire me now that I'm healed. I'll need some food and a roof over my head tonight." For this man, the concerns of work and the worries of life make taking a few minutes to say thank you a few minutes too many. That happens today. Work is important, stress is constant, the urgent is always pressing upon us, demanding our attention and our time. We know this man; maybe we see ourselves a little bit in him.

Or it could be the eighth said, "If I go back to thank that guy, he's going to want something, and I don't have anything. I'd better make sure he never sees me again." Our eighth friend is worried that Jesus is going to ask him for something, afraid that what seems like grace and a gift is actually a trick to get him to pay up. Jesus is going to ask something of us: he wants us to be our best selves, to be the generous, loving, kind, forgiving, gracious wonderful people

God imagined before the beginning of the world. That's not a price to pay; it's a gift to receive!

And perhaps the ninth said, "My trip to the temple of Cybele this morning is really paying off. I better go thank her for her help. After that, I'll cover my bases and thank Jesus too, if I have time." In the ancient world, there were lots of gods who might have heard you, so you might go off and thank them first.

You don't have to have leprosy to be too busy to thank God, or too afraid of the social consequences, or too worried about what God will ask of you, or just caught up in the demands of family and work to take a moment and reflect on your blessing.

Only the tenth said, "I'm healed, I'm healed, thank God I'm healed! I've got to go back and thank Jesus for what he's done for me. Without him, this never would have happened."

The text is so interesting, because it describes this man as having turned around to go back to Jesus. Turning around is the language of conversion in the Bible, almost as if this man were not only healed of his leprosy, but also healed of his social isolation, and even of his isolation from God.

He turns around, and he goes back to Jesus, but this time, he doesn't stand far off. This time he goes right up to Jesus and throws himself at Jesus' feet. He knows that Jesus has made all the difference in his life, that in a very real way, Jesus has taken him from social death to social life. The physical nearness to Jesus as he falls at Jesus' feet is a symbol of the social and spiritual nearness that has happened in his life.

He was trapped in his disease and in its social consequences, and now he is free. Now he can embrace those he loves again; now he can go home to his family; now he can escape the shame of everyone thinking he was cursed by God.

Maybe he's just the first to really realize what his healing means, and what Jesus has done for him. And he's just so thankful that he can't go another step without going back to say thank you.

Now, Jesus confirms for us that all ten were healed. It's not that the others

who weren't grateful weren't healed, or lost their healing. But when this one comes back, Jesus implies that he has gotten something extra.

Our text says, "Your faith has made you well." That's a good translation. But another possible translation is, "Your faith has saved you." In either case, the man's gratitude has led him to a deeper connection with Jesus. Some theologians have even suggested that gratitude is itself a kind of faith, in this case almost a synonym for faith.

In our busy world, it's so easy to forget to be thankful. The worries of the world, of family, of work, keep us forever on the go. We have to get dinner; we have to meet a friend; we have to get back to the office. We have things to do and other places to be, but perhaps this morning we'll be inspired by this one man with a horrible disease who went back to thank Jesus and take a moment to give thanks to God for all God has done for us in Jesus.

It's easy enough to find reasons why gratitude is not necessary, or can be postponed.

Let's make sure that we are in the 10% who remember to thank Jesus for all that he has done for us, for he has done better than cure us of leprosy. He has cured us of death. And that is most certainly a reason to fall at his feet in thankfulness.

I promised to tell you a story about the one man in south Thailand who became a Christian without having leprosy.

Like the others, he became an outcast, too. His wife had left him, taking their child. She wouldn't speak to him, nor let him visit his daughter. His house was burned down, his crops were set on fire, and he was beaten nearly to death.

It was so bad that the missionaries themselves told him that he should go back to his old faith, or at least be a Christian secretly so that he wouldn't be ostracized and in danger.

I'll never forget what he said. He told them, "I am just glad that Jesus has considered me worthy to suffer for his name."

He was willing to go through whatever came his way because he was so grateful for what Jesus had done in his life. He had willingly joined himself to

the lepers in fellowship. He had accepted social rejection, and worse, because of his faith.

But he did it joyfully because he was so thankful to Jesus for the relationship he now had with God.

I was stunned by the lepers' gratitude for pain, and for this man's joy at being found worthy to suffer as a witness to Jesus. Jesus had changed their lives, and through them, Jesus forever changed mine. I will never think of thankfulness the same way again, and thanks be to God for that.

Amen