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Luke 17:11-19

## MADE WHOLE

The ten men probably didn't know each other before the disfiguring disease of leprosy began to creep over their bodies. But the disease would have thrust them into each other's company. We don't hear much about leprosy today, but in biblical times, this disease struck horror in the hearts of everyone. Since there was no treatment for the disease as there is today, leprosy could creep across the body, eating away at fingers and toes and facial features. And this ugly physical condition also involved a profound social stigma. People with leprosy were banished from the community, separated from their families, and forced to live in abject poverty on the margins of towns and villages. If people with leprosy wandered close to a village, they were required to shout out, "Unclean, unclean" as a warning to anyone walking nearby to keep their distance.

Imagine, then, that moment of horror when each of these ten lepers first noticed patches of discolored skin on their body. Knowing that this would mean banishment from loved ones, from friends, from their entire community, knowing that it would consign them to a life of great deprivation and poverty, perhaps they even tried to hide the disease from others. Until it could no longer be hidden. And their lives effectively came to an end. Each of the ten was then forced into the company of those suffering from the same disfiguring malady and forced to survive as best they could by scrounging through waste and refuse and by begging.

With this understanding, it is impossible to accept, as some would have us believe, that this is a story about one grateful leper and nine who were not grateful. The nine lepers who did not turn back after Jesus healed them *had* to have been grateful. Their lives had just been handed

back to them. And before we cast them in the role of the “bad guys” in this story, let’s also remember that they were only doing what Jesus had told them to do. Jesus tells all ten lepers to go show themselves to the priests, who were the designated officials empowered to certify that they were now clean and could re-enter society. Now remember, they are not yet healed. But they all ten obey Jesus and head off to find the priest. And on the way, they are healed.

This is where the story moves from simply being a story about a miraculous healing to being about something bigger. The other nine continue to the priest as Jesus instructed them. They did what Jesus told them to do. They did not disobey. In fact, they were supremely obedient. And it’s hard to find any fault in that.

But the one leper, the one who was a Samaritan, a member of a despised ethnic group and thus a double outcast, this one leper turns back and throws himself at Jesus' feet in praise and thanksgiving. For this one leper, duty gave way to something else. Duty gave way to love. This one who was twice rejected, hated for being a Samaritan and feared for being a leper, turned back to Jesus to give praise and thanksgiving because he was overcome by love. In Jesus he experienced a God who embraced him—*all* of who he was, including his disfigurement, his suffering, and his social rejection. The leper discovered a God of love and a God of life. And this realization transformed his heart. And so he turns back out of love. Duty gives way to love.

Much of what we associate with religion centers on what that tradition teaches its followers how to behave and what they should do—the conduct and rituals and behaviors the followers of that religion are expected to carry out. Go to church, or temple, or the mosque. Pray certain prayers at certain times of the day. Eat or refrain from eating certain foods. Give money to the poor. Carry out acts of charity. Often we judge ourselves and one another by how we do or do not live obediently to these duties and rituals of our particular faith.

But Jesus never wanted us to simply go through the motions. In fact, he was often critical of people who reduced faith to a series of pious activities but who neglected a deeper inner transformation. According to Jesus, it is not enough to refrain from hurting your enemy--we are called to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. An essential element of Christianity, an essential component of Jesus' teachings, was to move us from duty to love.

Of course, there is a place for obedience and duty. Sometimes, when we may not feel especially giving, forgiving, kind, just, compassionate, duty to the demands of our faith can carry us through. A sense of duty can be helpful when on any given day we may not feel like living out the tenets of our faith. But duty is never the stopping point for Jesus. Think about how parents teach their children to say please and thank you or to share their toys with others. Long before the children may understand or feel gratitude or kindness, we teach them to carry out these social duties. But these social duties are really not the ultimate goal, are they? We teach such lessons with the hopes that one day, eventually, duty will give way to a genuine feeling of gratitude, to a genuine desire to share, to a genuine desire to be kind. Duty is never the final destination of Christianity, but rather, the goal is that duty will give way to the transformation of the heart.

All ten of the lepers in our story were healed of their terrible illness. But something additional happened to our tenth leper. After he came back and offered thanksgiving to Jesus, Jesus tells him, "your faith has made you well." The word used here carries a deeper meaning than just being healed. The word used here can also be translated as "your faith has saved you," or also "your faith has made you whole." Ten lepers were healed. But only one was made whole. He was made whole because he allowed love for Jesus' immense mercy to flood his heart. And he was made not just well--he was made whole.

That is why Jesus wants us to move from a faith that is merely based on duty to a faith that is rooted in love. Because love is the only way we will know wholeness. We can go to church. We can pray. We can volunteer, teach classes, serve on committees, serve in our broader community. We can write checks to charitable organizations. We can get up each day and meet the expectations of our families and our employers and our community. We can tolerate the company of those people we dislike and behave politely. We can give second chances to those people who have offended us. We can carry out all these duties in obedience to our Christian faith. But we will not be whole without love—a love that grows from an awareness of our own brokenness and need and of God’s grace toward us.

The tenth leper was clear about his disfigurement. His disease disfigured him. And his standing as a Samaritan left him socially disfigured in the eyes of others. But from the hands of Jesus he received mercy and love. And this awareness fueled in him a tremendous gratitude which he immediately offered to his Savior. And he was made whole.

We are also disfigured people who have been recipients of God’s mercy and love. Every single one of us falls short of living out the image of God. We disfigure this holy image by all the things we do that hurt ourselves and others, by the narrow attitudes of our hearts and minds, by our selfish tendencies, by our apathy to suffering, by our greed. God’s holy image is disfigured in every single one of us. And when we are honest, when we accept our disfigurement, then we can be open to the amazing truth: that even in this state of disfigurement, God loves us totally, completely, and fully. And then this amazing truth can become the catalyst toward an inner transformation. And we will move beyond just doing our duty in life. We will be motivated by love. As a result, our gratitude will be more than just remembering the nice things we enjoy in life—our gratitude will well up inside us for the goodness we receive even as

we know ourselves to be broken and imperfect. Then our efforts to forgive will move beyond keeping score and will become rooted in the deep desire for reconciliation. Then our acts of service won't be just going through the motions but will stem from profound compassion for another. Then we can know joy even as we live with hardship. And we can know a life rooted in something greater than doing our duty. We can know the wholeness that comes from the love of God.