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3/26/23—University Presbyterian Church
Luke 17:11-19; 1 Corinthians 18-25

DAILY ORIENTATION

Ten lepers were healed. But one was saved. Ten lepers were healed, but *one* was saved.

The ten lepers see Jesus passing by and they call out to Jesus to have mercy on them.

Jesus tells them all to go show themselves to the priest and on their way to the priest, all ten of them are healed. But one of the lepers, upon seeing that he was healed, returns to Jesus. And when this one leper falls at Jesus' feet with gratitude, Jesus tells him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well," which translates literally from the Greek as "your faith has saved you." Your faith has saved you.

Now here is what I am *not* going to do today. I'm *not* going to beat up on the other nine lepers. The other nine lepers get wrongly blamed for a lot of things they were *not* guilty of doing. Sometimes the other nine lepers get blamed for not having enough faith. As some people interpret this, Jesus praises the one leper for his faith, so by default the other nine must not have had faith. But that argument just doesn't hold water. Let me tell you why. Leprosy was a disfiguring and contagious skin condition which terrified people so much in the ancient world that people with leprosy were banished from society. But since there was not the same medical knowledge we have today, many kinds of skin conditions were given the diagnosis of leprosy. So, say you had a bad case of eczema—you might get hit with the leprosy diagnosis and be immediately kicked out of society, forced to live on the outskirts of town in great poverty and suffering. *But* if your skin condition should clear up, well then, you were to go show yourself to the priest and the priest would then certify that you were healed and could now return to the community.

In our story, Jesus tells all ten to go show themselves to the priest and even though they all were *still afflicted* with their skin condition, they all follow his instructions. Even when they had not yet been healed, they all did as Jesus told them. That is the very definition of faith.

Sometimes the other nine lepers are blamed for not being thankful. Jesus praises the one who turned back in gratitude so some people will argue that the other nine were not grateful for their healing. But come on! They *had* to have been grateful. Suddenly they are cured of a disfiguring, socially stigmatizing disease that consigned them to a life of poverty and alienation, and you tell me they weren't *grateful*? Of course they all were grateful.

And let's also note for good measure that the nine lepers might be commended for how *obedient* they were to Jesus. He told them to go show themselves to the priest and that is what they did. They obeyed.

Let's focus, then, our attention on the one who turned back, the one we are told was a Samaritan, who despite being a member of a group of people hated by Jewish people, who was therefore a double outcast, who nonetheless received praise from Jesus.

When seeing that he was healed, when beholding this unimaginable blessing, this Samaritan leper literally changes his direction and heads back to the one who made it possible. All ten lepers were grateful, but the Samaritan leper's gratitude inspired him to re-orient his path, his way, and to turn toward the one who gave him this new life. And because of his orientation toward the one who gave him a new life, Jesus tells him "your faith has *saved* you."

We have been spending these weeks in Lent contemplating what it means "to be saved." A lot of Christians tend to think of salvation as something we are rewarded with after we die. But Jesus spent very little of his time speaking about the afterlife. Instead, he spent a great deal of time teaching people how to walk a holy way, a saving way, in this lifetime.

The story of the Samaritan leper reveals something important to us about salvation. Rather than being just something we get when we die, the salvation Jesus offers us can be understood as a life-long orientation toward Jesus and his way. Salvation is a *way* of living rather than a destination.

When we orient our lives toward Jesus, we find a saving way—a saving way through life. To be clear, this is not a way that will offer us a safe life—safe from hardships or pain or struggle. This way will not offer us a *safe* life. It didn't for Jesus and it won't for us. But a *safe* life is different than a *saved* life. Jesus offers us a *saving* way of living this life.

This world is a beautiful place, but as we all know it is also a hard place. Life is full of heartbreak and challenges, sorrows and cruelty. We get lost. We get afraid. We feel unmoored by events in our lives. We may wonder what life is all about. Who can doubt when watching the evening news that this world and its people need saving?

Jesus came to save the lost. He came to deliver us from the life-depleting forces at work in our lives and in our hearts and in our world. All four gospels reveal Jesus' saving message of love and grace, of compassion and justice, of service and generosity. Jesus offers us a saving way.

And each day we are given opportunities to orient our lives toward Jesus and his way. That is what our life of faith is about: orienting our lives, over and over again, toward Jesus and his way. Do we respond with gratitude? Will we act with compassion? Do we work to reconcile divided groups in our community or within our families? Will we live with joyfulness? Will we generously offer our lives and money and talents? Will we strive to see the humanity in our enemy? Will we stand up for the powerless? Will we live in harmony with others and all

creation? Will we honor our God? Every day, every hour, provides us opportunities to orient our lives toward Jesus and his saving way.

And that means that salvation can be understood as something dynamic. Things that are dynamic are on-going. That idea of salvation may seem unconventional to those of us who are used to thinking of salvation as a one-time event. Sometimes we Christians speak about Jesus' saving us as something that happened in the past: "when Jesus saved me," some will say, like it's over and done with. Yet notice what the Apostle Paul says in his letter we read to the Corinthian community. Paul writes: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." To us who are *being saved*. Did you hear how Paul refers to salvation as an on-going experience? Please don't misunderstand! It's not that we have to earn our salvation every day, because salvation is not something we earn. But through Jesus, God offers us a saving way through life. Salvation comes when we daily, even hourly, orient our lives toward Jesus and his way.

That is what the Christian Church is supposed to help people do. The Christian Church is supposed to guide people on Jesus' saving way. Instead, throughout history and even in the present, the Christian Church itself got lost from that way when it supported the colonization of peoples and lands, the enslavement and subjugation of peoples, when it preached a message of intolerance and perpetrated acts of violence, and promoted the idea that salvation was some kind of prize you won for the afterlife, and when it focuses more on maintaining buildings and increasing membership numbers than it does on prioritizing Jesus' way of justice and inclusive love. The Christian Church has often lost its way from the saving love of Jesus.

And we as individuals, we too will fail, even when we try our best. We may *want* to walk Jesus' saving way, but then we fail to do so, or sometimes we aren't always sure *how* to do

so. And so we seek God's grace and rise again from our beds the next day with the desire and the commitment to orient ourselves toward Jesus, however imperfectly, because we believe that the way of Jesus saves us and our world.

The writer and theologian Thomas Merton wrote a prayer—commonly referred to as the Merton prayer—about this desire to orient our lives toward Jesus. He prays:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think that I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore, I will trust you always,
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear,
for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.