

“On the face of it, the story of the ten lepers is not such a remarkable story” (CC Diane Roth | Ordinary People).

It's not unusual that Jesus would heal lepers. It happens in a handful of places in the gospels. But I find those other stories often more remarkable than this healing. Sure, here it's ten lepers at once, but the other healings often involve Jesus' reaching out and touching the sick. In a society in which the sick, the stricken, were cast out of society (as lepers certainly were), Jesus' act of healing the sick was not only “lifting the curse,” it was returning them to community, to touch, to acceptance, to belonging, to love.

But here, it's as though Jesus just waves his hand, and says over his shoulder, “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” He sends these lepers to church, “And as they went, they were made clean.” Jesus simply hears their cries for mercy, sends them away and they are healed.

One article I read this week compared those nine lepers to members of her church community. Worship “...was a regular obedience. Like these nine lepers, “who do exactly what Jesus tells them to do.”

But then there's this one, “when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.”

This is remarkable. The turning back of this one is remarkable.

For those of us who are regularly obedient, coming to church most Sundays, we get a lot of good things by “showing ourselves to the priest.” We get something out of being in community, from hearing the scriptures regularly, from receiving the Eucharist, even finding some interior healing some days.

But we also tend to fall into a habit of “inoculating” the remarkable stuff we hear. This fellow for instance, he simply had more to be thankful for. Not only had he suffered with this disease, like these others, he was also a foreigner (A Samaritan no less!): He must have been especially grateful - of course he turned back. Not so remarkable, Pastor Ben.

I'ma disagree with you now. This is remarkable. How often do you find yourself utterly overcome? How often do you see other people overtaken by emotion? When was the last time you were (or you saw someone) overwhelmed? This man is **overcome by gratitude** for what Jesus has done for him. With a loud voice, he praises God, prostrates himself at Jesus' feet and thanks him! He loses his cool, his composed exterior and falls to pieces with gratitude before Jesus.

This is remarkable, dear ones. It's the first remarkable thing about this story. There is a second but we're going to dig into this one first.

Slowing down the action, we see ourselves in the regularly obedient crowd of lepers. Luke tells us that they “approached” Jesus, “keeping their distance.” They are seeking something they know only he can give - mercy - and still they keep their distance.

Sure, it’s a communicable disease - of course they kept their distance. But still, for better or for worse, they kept the distance society put upon them: They adhered to that distance.

Now, rather than only a product of their disease (an appropriate precaution), I hear that “*distance*” as an internalized barrier. Because of the way society treated them, did they feel undeserving, ashamed? Were they only after physical healing from Jesus? “When he saw them,” we read. Jesus looked and, seeing them fully, sent them to the place where they could find their social affliction lifted and get their return to society “certified!” Jesus, even without touching them, healed the breach they needed healed.

And still, they kept their distance.

My internship pastor and I talked quite a bit about “arm’s length Christianity” - the way we keep Jesus at a distance; the effort we give to staying rational and composed in the face of the gospel, even and especially in church. Even and especially Lutherans. Trust me, I get it.

But my return to church in my late 20s was an experience of being overcome. That “fully seen” feeling when I wandered back into worship was palpable, and it would invariably reduce me to a puddle of tears every Sunday. It was that feeling of relief, of acceptance, of belonging, of being held by a community to the light and love of Jesus. It was seeing people bloodied and broken (by age, life stories, and circumstances) gathering, singing, praying, then shuffling forward to receive the gift of mercy in this simple meal. It was the feeling of receiving that gift of mercy myself and hearing it pronounced “For me.”

That feeling of “overcome” stuck with me through my internship where I cried through many of my sermons. But the tears eventually dried up, because it’s hard to stay overcome. It’s hard to remain open like that, vulnerable, penetrable. The world causes those wounds that bleed to “scar over” - one kind of healing at the expense of another. For the sake of survival, we “tap the brakes” on feelings that might dissolve our control and come bubbling out. We extend a hand - no longer in welcome, but in **“Stop. Too much.”** We keep those feelings, we keep Jesus, at an arm’s length. We refuse to be overcome.

But when it comes to faith, when it comes to Jesus, we need to be overcome. If we hold out forever, refusing to receive the fullness of what Jesus is offering, refusing to be reduced by that gift to the exact place and person we are, faith never quite takes hold. The regular obedience of church helps, being reminded week after week. But faith can become brittle during the course of a life. The world outside these walls tells us what we do in here is bogus, superstitious, unreasonable, unremarkable. And sometimes those words walk in here with us. But sometimes, despite what we've heard or even believed, Jesus cracks the door, pries it open and walks on in. We are inevitably overcome with what he gives us here, with what we find here. For Jesus came and comes to do just that - to overcome all our efforts to keep calm, to keep him out.

And so here is this leper, healed, prostrate, utterly reduced and giving thanks. It's a display of gratitude for the gifts he's been given. And Jesus goes remarkable again - "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Does that give you pause? Faith is the cure? Did the other 9 get to keep their cleansing even though they didn't turn back? Without this display of faith, without saying thank you, did they stay healed? I bet they did. So what does Jesus mean when he says to this man overcome, "your faith has made you well"?

Could faith be the real gift here? The scars fallen to the ground, the tender flesh restored, was it faith that overcame this man? It seems faith pre-existed his healing - he did come begging for mercy, believing he could get it from Jesus. But perhaps it was that brittle faith, the faith of a hard life in a hard society - a faith cracked and peeling, missing a few parts. Brittle or not though, something overcomes him (making him praise God with a loud voice for all to hear). Something makes him well.

Or could it be that it was gratitude? The word sure fits the scene, doesn't it? But what's more is that I wonder if the word 'gratitude' itself could be a clear enough description of what 'faith' is? Is gratitude faith? A kind of knowledge that the healing we find here is not of our own making? A kind of feeling that what we touch here is given? Is it gratitude that overcomes our cool exteriors when we let it, dissolving our barriers and letting Jesus come a little closer?

Have you ever touched that gratitude? Gratitude for the giver of what we find here in church? Maybe just gratitude for church in general; for this community, for the vitality, the vulnerability, the identity, the belonging, the acceptance, the life and health you find here? The memory of those passed, held still and remembered together? The love of those around you? The love of God that greets you, that gives you as a gift to this place and these people? The love of God that reminds you of these gifts seated beside you?

The truth is, **we have only what we've been given.** Our response to that gift, to these gifts, is the question that needs answering by you this week.

As you think about what your giving to this church will look like in the coming year, as you're filling out your pledge cards (and bringing them back next Sunday), think about these gifts. Reflect on the needs that have been filled for you by this place. Remember the grace and mercy that is yours in Christ and think about whether these are things you want, not only for your fellow church members, but for your whole community, for this whole town.

Let that wondering, remembering, reflecting (that gratitude) overcome you. Let your arm fall, and encounter what has been given you and the one who gives it to you. Let the scars fall away, let the spirit of gratitude and plenty move you. And in confidence ask yourself, what can I give in return?

We don't know what this Samaritan Leper gave back. We know only what he was given: What he was given | was life. I pray that like him, overcome by Jesus and the life we receive from him, we might **give our very selves** for the sake of our gratitude, for the sake of the world, and for the sake of the life to come.

AMEN