

Text: Luke 17:11-19

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was studying the Gospel text for today, I came in with some preconceived ideas. This is not unusual... we all bring our preconceived ideas with us when we study God's Word. The real trick is laying them aside and engaging the text as it is, as God inspired it to be written for us. My baggage had to do with the current pandemic, which isn't too surprising since it is all the news talks about and is everywhere on the internet. People don't make small talk about the weather, they make small talk about the pandemic. This past week I got an e-mail from my health insurance company advising me to stay away from family during Thanksgiving. Maybe I should send them some unsolicited advice?

My initial thought concerning the Gospel text from Luke 17 was that we can all appreciate the plight of the lepers better because in the time of COVID-19 we understand what it is like to be shunned as they were. But as the days progressed, I realized that was completely backwards. The lepers were an exception, not the norm, and now people are being advised to embrace shunning, to shun almost everyone including your loved ones, including the healthy. So this really isn't comparable, except as a negative example. We are being encouraged to treat everyone the way lepers used to be treated. We are being told that you must shun strangers and family alike and if you don't then you are one of the "unclean". People have started to accept this thinking. Even after the pandemic has died down, after the bulk of people have either had it or been vaccinated, it will be very hard to get some people to stop thinking like this. They will use the excuse "I'm just being careful" to justify shunning others, to avoid helping and loving their neighbor. The next six months will really prove what kind of people we have become.

But back to the text. This event from Jesus' life is well known to us. He and His disciples were traveling along the border between Galilee and Samaria when they were approached by a group of ten lepers. Lepers lived on the edge of society, both figuratively and literally. They lived on the charity of others. People would leave them food and clothing and other items on the outskirts of town and if they kept their "social distancing" they could still have a conversation, or even eavesdrop on other people's conversations. That is probably how they heard about Jesus. They heard the people in town talking about this teacher from God who could work miracles and they realized they had an opportunity.

They stopped at a distance and yelled out to him, "**Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.**" (v.13) The Greek may sound familiar to you: "eleison haymas", or "have mercy on us", a phrase which features strongly throughout our liturgical settings. "*Lord, have mercy upon us,*" is the prayer of the Church because it is a prayer of humility and powerlessness. In just a few words we acknowledge that we approach God with nothing and are entirely dependent

upon His grace. This is what the lepers did. Does that mean that they understood who He was really was? Did they know and believe that He was the Messiah, the Anointed One of God? Probably not fully. But they did know that God was with Him, at least, which is why they cried out to Him.

Now, Jesus gave them a test, even if it isn't obvious. He did not heal them on the spot. Instead, He told them to go show themselves to the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was not just around the corner. Remember that they are between Galilee and Samaria, a three or four days walk from Jerusalem. And in addition to the distance, the only reason to go to the Temple and show themselves to the priests was to prove that they had been cleansed and could once again join in corporate worship and normal life. But they had not been healed and Jesus didn't give them a long explanation about how if they just trusted in Him and did what He said, then they would be cleansed. No, He just told them to go to Jerusalem and they believed Him. Off they went, all ten of them, confident that Jesus could do something, even if they weren't sure what.

While they were walking, they were cleansed. The infectious sores that covered their bodies disappeared; the rotting flesh was made whole. They looked like they had years before and probably broke into run, anxious to get to Jerusalem so they could start their lives over again. They wanted to "reset" just like we want to reset our lives after the past nine months. So nine of them took off, eager to start over, but one did not. One of them realized the significance of what had taken place and he turned around and went back to the place he last saw Jesus. This man was a Samaritan.

Recall that the Samaritans were, and still are, an offshoot from Judaism. They were originally Jews who were not forced into exile by the Babylonians in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., and they had intermarried with Gentiles over the centuries. During that time they had turned into a sect of Judaism because they changed the Books of Moses to benefit themselves, most famously by saying that God visited Moses not at Mount Sinai, but at Mount Gerizim, which just happened to be in their back yard. Jews and Samaritans started in the same place but ended up farther and farther away with each passing generation. And, importantly, they hated each other and no pious, believing Jew would have anything to do with a heretical Samaritan. They were to be shunned all the time, even when they didn't have leprosy.

This was the man who came back to Jesus. A member of a religious sect that denied some important things and allowed some others, a man who had no right to expect anything of a Jew, especially one who was widely acclaimed as being sent from God. But God creates faith when and where He will, even amidst error. And the faith He created in this Samaritan said, "Jesus is more than just a wise man." Because when he got back to Jesus, he threw himself at His feet, bowing down with his face to the ground, and he thanked Him. Now, that doesn't sound like much in English, does it? He "thanked" him. But Luke recorded a specific word for a reason: The word he used was "eucharisto", which may sound familiar to you. It is where we get the word Eucharist, which means "giving thanks to God". Throughout the New

Testament, this word is only used in relation to God and that was what the Samaritan understood. That is why he bowed down before Jesus: He gave Him thanks in a way that you only give thanks to God.

Our Lord mused aloud, **“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”** (v.17-18) This was a rhetorical question, of course. Jesus knew what had happened, but He wanted everyone else to know what had happened. The one who was considered unclean beforehand was the only one who returned. The one who was despised before he was infected, was the one who understood what it meant to be truly cleansed by God. It’s funny how that works: Those who have the most to repent of, who have the worst past, the ugliest sins, are often the most pious Christians. They know and appreciate just how much they have received from God.

Jesus said to the man kneeling before him, **“Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you.”** I know that is not what we heard during the readings or what you have in your bulletin. The ESV translation says *“your faith has made you well,”* and so do most other translations. I suspect this is because they wanted to pay homage to the familiar sound of the King James which says *“thy faith has made thee whole”*. But the word in Greek literally means *save* or *rescue*. That is what Jesus was talking about: This Samaritan was saved because He believed that Jesus was the Christ, worthy of worship and praise as only God is worthy of worship and praise. He had made a theological leap that would take most of the disciples some time to make, that many people today still can’t make: That Jesus is very God of very God.

Today we gather to give do the same thing , to “eucharisto” Jesus just as the Samaritan did, and for the same reason. He has cleansed us and made us whole. Yes, we are thankful for all that God has given us physically, but that pales in comparison to what He has given us spiritually: He has made us sons and daughters of the Most High. He shares His eternal relationship with us so that we pray “Our Father” not “Your Father” and He deepens that relationship even more by giving of Himself for us to eat and drink. Just as the leper lived off the charity and mercy of others, so also do we live off the mercy of God. He gives us everything we need to support this body and life and that’s not even the important part. He gives us healing where we need it most, in our heart and in our soul. We are forgiven, we are blessed, we are saved. We thank Him as we ought to, as the giver of every good thing.

In Jesus’s holy name, amen.

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