

The Ten Lepers

Luke 17:11-19

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The text begins with a bit of geography—not just land geography, spiritual geography too. One his way toward Jerusalem Jesus was traveling on the border of Galilee and Samaria. Most Jews of that day would not get within a ten-mile pole of Samaria. The hatred of Samaritans was both religious and racial. Israel was God’s people. Samaria was Not-God’s-People.

But that is where we often find Jesus, *on the boundary*. On the boundary of faith and doubt, belief and unbelief, on the boundary of the righteous and the sinner, the pure and the impure, the acceptable and unacceptable, the insider and outsider, the well and the sick, the loved and unloved. He’s on the boundary—and sometimes that boundary runs right through us.

On the boundary is where the gospel makes a difference, where salvation, healing and wholeness happen. (In the New Testament the same word means all three: salvation, healing, wholeness.) Not safely in the sheep-fold where the ninety-nine are warm and secure, but out in the wilderness where the one sheep

is lost. Jesus crossed every boundary imposed by his culture and religion--race, religion, nation and gender--so that lives could be changed by love. Not afraid of *contamination*, Jesus had come for *transformation*. As he would say later in Luke: "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10)

I

While passing along the border, ten lepers who had formed a small leper colony saw him and approached him, all the while keeping the safe distance prescribed by law. They must have heard that Jesus healed lepers and touched the untouchable *them*. Earlier in Luke, a leper had come to Jesus and said, "If you *want*, you can make me clean." Jesus said, "I *do* want," and he healed him. (Luke 5: 12-13).

The ten lepers cried out that most elemental human cry, "Lord help!" We cry it out when we are most afraid, most desperate, most helpless. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Jesus heard them and issued a terse command: "Go, show yourselves to the priest." You went to priests to de-brief a miracle, to verify a healing. But they weren't healed, not yet, and here is Jesus commanding them, "Go, show yourselves to the priest".

Sometimes we need to act as if healing is on the way even before it happens, to believe, in the words of Thomas Merton, that there is in us all a “hidden wholeness”. Pascal once counseled that sometimes we need to act *as if* we believe, then faith will come.

II

What did they do? They *went*, and *as they went* they were healed.

Sometimes this is how faith begins: as something we *do*. We hear God’s word to us and we go. The great poet—who was also a Jesuit—Gerard Manley Hopkins received a letter from someone struggling to believe asking him, “How can I have faith?” Hopkins wrote back a two-word answer, “Give Alms.” Sometimes that’s how faith begins, in doing. As someone has said, “Sometimes we need to *act* our way into a new way of thinking, rather than *think* our way into a new way of acting.”

That’s not all of faith; that’s not the wholeness of faith. Faith involves the mind and heart too. (We’ll get to that.) But sometimes faith begins in obedient action. Hearing and doing.

And *as they went*, they were healed. That’s a very hopeful thing to me: that as we go, as we walk the way of faith, we are being healed. We are moving, all of us, toward wholeness.

III

So far this is a healing story, much like others in the gospels, but here comes an unexpected turn. “Then one of them when he was healed turned back.” He turned back “praising God with a loud voice. “And when he got to Jesus he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet and gave him thanks. Maybe he never got to the priest. He couldn’t wait to thank Jesus!

Faith may begin in obedience, but it is fulfilled, made whole in praise and thanksgiving, in a mind that praises God and a heart overflowing in gratitude.

One came back. Then Luke adds an essential detail: “he was a *Samaritan*.” Was there something in his Samaritan-ness that opened him to gratitude? Maybe it was his very down-and-outness. He had three strikes against him: he was a foreigner, he was a leper, he was a Samaritan. Flannery O’ Connor once wrote: “We accept grace the quickest when we have the least.”

So here we are again, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan is the hero of the story! This must have been deeply unsettling to the religious folk of Jesus’ day. The Samaritans were racially impure, having inter-married with non-Jews. They worshipped differently and read scriptures differently. And, having come from Jewish stock, they should have known better!

But Jesus traveled back and forth through Samaria and brought God's love to them. (Remember the wonderful story in John about the Samaritan woman Jesus met at Jacob's well? He brought God's salvation to her, then commissioned her to be his apostle to her Samaritan village (John 4: 7-42). And, yes, he made Samaritans the heroes of his stories. So some of his opponents said, "*He must be one of them!*" In John's gospel some religious leaders come to him and said, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (John 8:48). Jesus gave a tantalizing half-answer: "I have no demon." He let the Samaritan charge go unanswered. Maybe Jesus was saying, is saying: "I am whoever is despised and rejected in this world. I am Samaritan, Haitian, Mexican; I am black, gay, trans, womanish, Latina, homeless. I am whoever is unloved, that they may be loved, whoever is excluded that they may feel the full welcome of God."

Guess who's coming to dinner? Mother Teresa said, when she saw the poor of Calcutta coming to her: "Here comes Christ in another distressing disguise." So let us say to all who need love, human and divine, "There's room at the table."

IV

Back to the story. When the Samaritan leper came back to praise God, and thank Jesus, Jesus asked a question and proclaimed the healing.

The question was “Where are the other nine? Were not ten cleansed?” It was a rhetorical question. Why are any of us not more grateful for what God has done? People tend to live with one of two attitudes: a sense of *entitlement* or a basic sense of *gratitude*. The entitlement folk have a “contract” relationship with God: If I do my part, then God must do God’s part. In a Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown is writing a letter to Santa Claus. Lucy comes into the room.

Lucy: Are you writing those greedy letters to Santa Claus again?

Charlie Brown: I’m not greedy. All I want is what I have coming to me. All I want is my fair share.

Lucy: Santa Clause doesn’t owe you anything!

Charlie Brown: He does if I’ve been good. That’s the agreement. Any 10th grade student of commercial law knows that!

We might all say at this point: “Good Grief!” But some people’s religion is like that. Their whole approach to life is like that. And there’s little room for gratitude.

Then Jesus said to the leper: “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you whole.” Not just well, but whole, for wholeness carries with it the presence of praise and thanksgiving.

And, we can *not* be healed but be *whole* spiritually.

A few years back I read a book by a white-collar criminal. He was sentenced to live out his prison time in the last leper colony in America, in Louisiana.

The leper colony had a chapel where the lepers would go to worship. That in itself gives us something to think about. One day during the reading of the scripture he saw a leper pressing his open Bible right against his face. Our author wondered what he was doing. Leprosy can lead to blindness; it can also lead to the loss of feeling in one's finger tips. Then it dawned on him: Since he had no feeling left in his fingertips, the man was reading his Braille Bible with his tongue. The Psalmist writes: "How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth (Psalm 119:103). He was praising God and thanking Jesus—even *without* a miracle. A leper who came back.

V

We all need a place of praise and gratitude. Last year on the *Late Show* with Stephen Colbert, Stephen Colbert and his guest Neil De Grasse Tyson switched places. Tyson became the interviewer and Colbert the interviewee. It focused on Science and Religion. At one point Tyson asked Colbert, who is a devout Catholic, why he was a believer in God. Colbert answered: "My faith comes from a place of a need to be grateful. It gives me," he said, "a place to place my gratitude...". I was

very moved by these words. Colbert is a thankful man and his faith gives him somewhere to place his gratitude.

For what, for whom are you thankful today? Doesn't it often focus on people who've made a difference in your life? I think of my mother putting me to sleep at night, rubbing my back as I fell asleep. So these words of scripture resonate deeply in me: "The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the Everlasting Arms (Deuteronomy 33:27).

I think of my father, bless his memory, who taught me so much. As a minister of music he taught me to *sing* my faith before I had to confess it. It helped save me from literalism and fundamentalism. When you sing the faith you learn to read between the lines, you go deeper than the literal. It becomes poetry. The mind descends into the heart.

I think of my high school English teacher and debate coach, Mrs. Potter, who was the first to ask me: "Have you ever thought about being a minister?" A seed was planted.

I think of the great Presbyterian minister, George Buttrick, one of the great preacher/theologians of the 20th century. He taught in his 80's at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and I by a remarkable Providence was his graduate

assistant. I learned more about being a pastor and preacher from him than anyone else in my life.

I could go on and on, and so could you. Behind, beneath, above every person who has graced our lives is the hand of the Unseen God whom we praise:

Now thank we all our God

With heart and hands and voices,

Who wondrous things hath done,

In whom the world rejoices;

Who from our mother's arms,

Has blessed us on our way

With countless gifts of love,

And still is ours today.

In George Bernanos' novel *Diary of A Country Priest*, a spiritual classic, he traces the life of a country priest in France, all in the voice of the priest. The last line of the book are his words: "All is Grace".

This is so. Every breath we take, every morning sunrise, all whom we love and who have loved us. Every sweetness in life, every hand that's helped us, every

arm that's held us. And the Christ who has shown us a God whom we can love. *All is grace.*

And so this day we turn, and say our thanks.