

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

### The Twice Healed?

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Arise and go on your way;  
your faith has made you well.’”

It was Sunday, right after church, as I was taking off my clerical vestments in my office. This gnarly looking man showed up at the side door and I heard him ask to speak to the minister. I brought him into my office with a couple of other people from the church. His hair was closely shaven, he looked dishevelled and on his arm he wore a bracelet from the Montreal General Hospital. He said that he had just finished radiation treatment for cancer, and that he needed money to get to back to his home near Quebec City, where he lived. “Would the church please help me,” he asked. I don’t know where he got the idea that he should come to church, but he did.

The guy really looked like someone who’d just finished radiation. He looked weak and gaunt and grey; not dressed right for the weather. It was the hospital bracelet that clinched it for me. He looked pitiful.

But then he said it; a line I've heard this a million times; "I will pay you back." I really wish he hadn't said that. I mean what are the chances of that happening.

And so down to the train station we went on a Sunday afternoon. The ticket was purchased and he boarded the train. He kept saying, "thank you, I'll pay you back some day." He left for Quebec City. He got treated for his disease, got a free ticket, and now he was on his way home. If he's anything like most people, health restored, he'll go back to his old life and forget his rash, desperate promise: "I'll pay you back." Right.

Like the sick ten lepers in our story from Luke, this man came looking for mercy. And when it's mercy you're looking for, where do you take your plea? "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." We are all praying that lately. That's what they're screaming out. Volume is all they've got so they ramp up their request. People seem still to know that if it's mercy you're after, best go to Jesus – his church, his people, his ministers – they're obliged to mercy. Sometimes Jesus and his people get close even when it is dangerous. Martin Luther said to pastors in time of plague, fumigate but don't flee. Take precautions, but don't run away from the flock. Be careful and be merciful. Mercy is what Jesus is all

about. Jesus' mission continues, even when we're socially distance, in quarantine.

These ten men are in desperate straits. Forced together – Jew and Samaritan - by their common contagious disease, they live on the edge of the village Jesus travels to. That's where people afflicted by leprosy lived – away from home and family and worship – they camped in makeshift shelters along the roadside. The edge of town was a place where garbage was strewn and fires burned to consume it. That's where we get the word for hell – *gehanna* that's the word for the garbage dump outside Jerusalem. The edge of town was the ancient isolation ward. Nothing more could be done for them, so for the sake of those who do not yet have what they have, out away from society was the best place to store such human ruin. Sickness still isolates. And so from a safe antiseptic distance these ten men called out for mercy from passersby. If they were lucky, they might get scraps of food and perhaps bits of clothing left for them. Some might be moved by compassion and ease their misery while they wasted away.

Luke doesn't tell us how they knew it was Jesus passing by. But these ten sick, ostracized men have Jesus' name. Maybe they'd heard rumours of healing. Maybe they've overheard that Jesus has mercy for outsiders,

castoffs, lost causes. Luke has Jesus working the side of the road and even venturing into graveyards on a number of occasions – talk about seeking out lost causes. Maybe this is what the creed means when it says Jesus descended into hell?

Strange how desperation gets you wondering if there could be truth to the rumour. Jesus thrives on hopeless situations, folks everyone else has given up on. People show up in church suspecting, but not quite believing, that mercy might be found here – in Jesus’ name. I know that because I’ve met people who have done that. I suspect it is for mercy’s sake that some of us find our way to church.

Maybe church attendance is our way of connecting our addictions, our endless cycles of self-destructive behaviour, our desperate situation, our despair at the world or the church or our fatigue and Jesus’ mercy. We’ve come to know – with greater or lesser certainly - that Jesus is merciful. He descends into our hells - so when trouble meets us, we meet him. And so some of us whisper faintly and some of us some yell full-throated hoping we’ve got it right: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us, on our world, [on me].”

Martina Drok - thought her emphysema would take her - never felt so all alone, and then I remember, 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me, and I knew he had been where I was.'

Jesus does have mercy – on us, and on these ten lepers. He comes to us in our hells. Their opened ended request gets them more than they might have asked for. If they'd spelled out the form of the mercy they wanted – a little food, a cloak, some spare change – they would have seriously under bid. What they get out of a general cry for mercy from Jesus is healed! Abundant mercy!

Jesus tells them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Go and act like people healed and you will be healed people. And with nothing to lose but leprosy, they head off in the direction of the priest. And it happens. They start down the road, and as they go they are healed. Can you imagine what this must have been like? The colour in their skin returned, sores healed over, fingers are restored, and the feeling came back to numb, limp limbs. It must have been incredible.

Nine of the ten do exactly as they are told. They follow the rules. They are obedient and compliant. They go directly to the temple, are pronounced clean, are restored to society - they return to normal. What

they most wanted they received. “And as they went,” writes Luke, “they were cleansed.” It’s a very particular word that St. Luke uses, “they are made clean, ritually pure, certified-grade-A unblemished.”

What it means is that not only do they have their health back. They can go back to their families, back to their communities, put themselves once again into social circulation. That’s huge. Health means a full-orbed life once again. Children can be picked up and hugged. Spouses can be embraced. They can sleep in their own beds again.

Jesus’ mercy means not just nice teeth and good hair, but human community. The mercy of Jesus radiates outward to restore not just particular individuals, but networks of human society. Each healed man becomes a source of joy to whole groups of sad people. When Jesus reassembles a life, plants hope and grants a future by his healing mercy, it changes the world.

Now, I’d have been happy if St. Luke finished his story right here. Wow! Jesus is merciful. Jesus touches desperate people and puts them on their feet – thanks be to God. That would encourage us all in the ministry, and we could get on with our day.

And yet, the healing of the ten isn't even the main point of the story. The thrust of the story concerns one man, who clearly can't follow instructions. While the other nine bustle off to the priest and get back into social circulation, without delay, one man, an outsider – a Samaritan and a rogue - goes back to Jesus. Just like the rest, he's healed. Just like the rest, he went on his way and had a miracle happen to him. But unlike the rest of them, he turned back to the source of his good fortune.

On the way back he belts out a verse of "In Christ alone, my hope is found" and takes up the old chestnut "Joyful, Joyful" for good measure.

When he gets to where Jesus is, he bows low to the ground, and he says, "thank you, thank you; o thank you so much" really loud. It is a bit of a spectacle; he's effusive and over the top – he's emotional! But isn't that how gratitude is, demonstrative, loud, excessive. (It seems this man is more Pentecostal than Presbyterian). Gratitude grips the man, heart and soul, in posture and verse. He just has to sing to God since prose can't carry the luggage of his o so awesome joy. He's got to say thanks, right now, today. Gratitude can't wait until he gets other matters tended to. Gratitude delayed is usually just ingratitude. He's all pumped up with thankfulness, and he's got to let it out in front of the right audience. And that audience is Jesus.

And Jesus says, “Where is everyone? Didn’t ten ask for mercy and get it, and it’s just you? You are not even one of us; you never frequented the synagogue (you Samaritan). Where are the people who should know better than to be ungrateful for the merciful acts of God? There should be an SATB clean complexion choir here singing glory to God, and it’s just your Samaritan solo.”

What happened we might ask? Why don’t more people acknowledge that the source of strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow is Jesus? Jesus poses the question, “was no one found to return and praise God except this Samaritan.” What’s wrong with the other nine, you would have thought we’d see a little gratitude. Why is it that the majority is so - what shall we call it - doxologically challenged, so praise reticent? It puzzles even Jesus, this lack of gratitude especially among those who ought to know better. They are off enjoying the gifts God gives and forgetful of the giver!

And then, Jesus pronounces a strange word on the singing Samaritan. “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” What? “Your faith has made you well?” Get up off the ground, and get back into the game, you are well.

Hang on. Wasn't he already well? I mean, the sores are gone, the fingers back. The future is an open book. He can go to his family. What do you mean Jesus, "rise up . . . your faith has made you well?" He's already cleansed. He asked for mercy, and he got it. Jesus you cleansed him already. Can a man or a woman be twice healed?

Apparently yes! And what's more, St. Luke seems to be telling us that the second healing is superior to the first. There's more to life than a clean bill of health and easy social circulation – although they are joys. The high point of the story isn't a healing that makes someone normal again. What a shame it would be to meet Jesus, the Saviour of the world, and take nothing from it but normal. Imagine getting a whole new situation and doing nothing but going back to the way it was. The man who returns, he gets a deeper gift. He moves forward!

He gets healed, but he also gets saved. The word translated "well" is the word *sodzo*, which means rescued, delivered, saved, made whole in the most profound sense. His healing was about more than limbs and looks, it was Easter for him. He's been raised by Jesus to really live. And to

be alive, to be well, is to be grateful to the God who gives life through Jesus Christ, even in a time like ours!

He's not just alive. He's well – in the truest sense of the term. He's awake to God, the Lord and Giver of Life. And you can always spot a person whose been twice healed by their excessive and heart-felt gratitude to God. Get touched by God and it makes a person get all theo/logical, doxo/logical.

I remember visiting a man dying of cancer. He had two days to live. The previous year, they didn't think he'd make it. But the cancer went into remission and he got an extra year. On my final visit of that extra year, I asked if I could pray for him before I left.

He said, "Yes, but wait a minute. Let me give you my final confession. Richard, I have to tell you that this last year of my life has been the best of all. I have never been so in love with my wife. I have seen flowers in a way I have never seen them before – full of beauty, spectacular to behold. I stopped to touch them. The sun light and the gardens, the green of trees, wow! I stand in awe of this unbelievable world."

And then he said, “You can pray now, but don’t ask God for anything, just offer a prayer of thanks for this last year of my life.” He got a year’s reprieve on his health, but more importantly he got raised up, he got Easter “well” for all eternity.

That’s Luke main point. Healing is great. Full health is wonderful. But until we’re able to trace our multiple blessings in life to the Giver of all good gifts, we are not yet well. We’re liable to just thank ourselves. We liable to think that everything we’ve got we’ve earned, and it makes us unbearable people. Nine people met Jesus got normal and went home. Back to the way it used to be. They went home had 1.3 children and got back on social media. One man, met Jesus, was healed and was raised from the dead – gratitude moved him to praise and worship, and never was he so alive. Jesus says that he, unlike the ungrateful nine, was actually well, alive, saved for a life that will never run out.

In conclusion: I should let you know that before I left Montreal, after a service, a man shook my hand at the door. I even asked him to sign the guest book, because I had not remembered seeing him before. He said, “Do you remember me?” I said, “sorry, I don’t remember much. I write everything down now.”

He said, "listen: don't you remember me? I came down from the Montreal General Hospital to your church. I was a mess. I asked you to help me get to back to Quebec City.' His hair was back, his face was full and he wore a tie – he looked normal. He said, "I came to church today, to worship with you. I'm well again, and I'm here to keep a promise. This morning I put a check on the plate – to repay you and then some. I'm so grateful to God to have my health back."

Now, I'm not naïve, I know this sort of thing doesn't happen every day.

St. Luke thinks that chances are about 1 in 10.

Friends, 'Give thanks to the Lord for he is Good!

**Amen.**