

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 10, 2023

+ Luke 17:11-19 +

“Turn back in Thanksgiving; Go forward in Faith”

On another occasion, as Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, he was passing along the border between Samaria and Galilee. When he entered a certain village, ten men with leprosy met him. Standing at a distance, they called out loudly, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” As they went away they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, thanking him. And he was a Samaritan. Jesus responded, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.”

When we hear the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers, it’s easy to put white hats on two men and black hats on nine.

Jesus, as always, is a good guy. He sees ten men suffering from leprosy, which could cover all kinds of infectious skin diseases, including what we now call Hansen’s Disease. Some of these conditions were terminal and demanded total isolation from everyone who did not suffer from the same disease. Other forms of leprosy were less severe and require only what we would call social distancing. These ten seem to have a more severe form of disease if you look closely at Luke’s choice of words: **Standing at a distance, they called out loudly, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”** They stay far enough from Jesus that they must yell. So, it would seem they are on the severe side of the leprosy spectrum.

We all learned during Covid how hard it can be to keep your physical distance from other human beings. We also learned how hard it is to be looked at by other people primarily as a potential source of disease. Isolation hurts, and so is being seen as a walking pathogen. And that is how these ten men live every day. That’s bad.

But Jesus is good. **When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.”** Jesus is so good that he will not only heal these suffering men but will also remain true to the Old Testament Law, which requires those healed of infectious diseases to have their healing certified by the priests. Jesus is so good that he not only gives these men healing but also the opportunity to go and tell the priests, who would no doubt ask how they were healed, about Jesus’ love.

Jesus is good enough to listen to their request and give them their lives back. And one of those healed – let’s put a white hat on him, too. He is a Samaritan, who might be the last one we’d expect to thank Jesus for this healing. But before he goes and shows himself to the priests, he turns back. **One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, thanking him.** It is not a casual “Thanks, Jesus!” It is a dramatic and thorough thanksgiving for the healing Jesus gives. This one leper – he is good, too. He receives Jesus’ healing and turns back in thanks.

But what about those other nine? If Jesus and the Samaritan leper-no-longer get white hats, shall we slap black hats on them? They’re bad! They receive Jesus’ healing, too, but they ungratefully hurry away without bothering to say thanks! Bad, bad men!

But maybe we shouldn't be too hasty about that. Maybe they're not all bad. Maybe there's a lot of good in them, too. Maybe gray hats would fit them better. Because look: **When he entered a certain village, ten men with leprosy met him. Standing at a distance, they called out loudly, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"** The other nine lepers need healing help and go to Jesus for the miraculous help they need. When they ask Jesus for help, they call him Master with a capital M. They believe Jesus is the Son of God, with the power of God. That's good.

Here's something else good: When Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests, they actually go! They go, believing that they will be healed on the way. **When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." As they went away, they were cleansed.** Did you see that? They were not yet healed when they turned and headed to the temple. But they went anyway! Because they believed Jesus' words of healing! That's amazing faith – not to wait for the proof, but just to trust that because Jesus says you will be healed, you will be!

No! No black hats for those nine lepers. They're not all bad. They believe in Jesus and trust his words of healing. And we should not suppose they are totally thankless, either. We can assume that at some point, after showing themselves to the priests, they also said prayers of thanks. But where they go wrong – where their hats turn from white to gray – is not saying thank you before enjoying their gift.

This is wrong but understandable. Put yourself in their position. And – I hate to bring up Covid again – but it may help us understand this a bit. Do you remember what it was like when Covid restrictions were first lifted? When airline and hotel bookings went back online? When offices, movie theaters, and restaurants opened their doors again? People paid premium prices and stood in lines and rushed and crushed to get back to life as usual.

Let me ask you: Did you stop to thank God when that happened, or were you so busy enjoying your restored life that you forgot? Maybe you thanked him eventually, but the urgency to return to normalcy was so powerful that probably first you just went and enjoyed. Now, can you imagine how eager these nine are to return to the lives they had before? Wives they may not have seen, or at least touched, for years? Children they have not hugged? Work undone? Nights slept in peace, without pain? Who has time to say thanks when so many good things are calling your name?

And this is one of the devil's favorite tricks to strip thanksgiving out of the hearts of God's people. God gives us so many good things in our lives. Family. Friends. Homes. Jobs. (Yes, your job is a blessing; just ask someone out of work.) School. Fun. Futures. So many blessings. And we get so busy enjoying God's gifts that we forget to thank him for them first and often. And why does the devil love this thanklessness, and do everything he can to foster it? Thankfulness requires you think about and acknowledge the source of your good things. Those who forget to thank soon forget the source of their blessings altogether.

We are often more like the nine lepers than the Samaritan leper. We need to be more like that one healed man, who we can no longer call a leper, but only a Samaritan. **One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice.** The Samaritan looks and sees that he has been healed. Look, and see that you have been healed. Like a disease, sin infects us. And it is terminal, not only for the body but also for the soul. But it's the worst terminal disease, because it's both terminal and non-terminal. It ends in death, but death without end. It is a disease that we need healing from, and without that healing we are condemned to something much worse than a life of isolation from family and friends,

without work or fun. We are condemned to death without end, isolated from God's goodness and glory forever, with only suffering.

See that you are healed. See that Jesus' holiness heals your sin. Thanklessness is one sin Jesus heals with his holiness. He thanks God for his bread, for his revelation of truth, for his protection, for every blessing. And in that holiness your thanklessness is healed. And so is all your sin. The blood that Jesus sheds washes away every sin and imperfection and makes you whole in the sight of God. The water of baptism makes Jesus' salvation yours and heals you for eternity.

Look, and see that you are healed. And then there is only one thing to do: turn back, without delay, and before you go and enjoy God's blessings, glorify God for them. Thank Him for the healing of your sin in Christ. Thank Him for your family, your friends, your money, your home, your job, your teachers, your police, your judges, your neighbors, funny jokes, good movies, and every other blessing he gives you to enjoy. And, like the healed Samaritan, do it **with a loud voice**. Like the Samaritan, fall at Jesus' feet giving thanks, because all these gifts are undeserved and come in pure grace. All of them, from the healing of sin all the way down to singing birds and pretty flowers, are gifts. See that you are healed and let your thanksgiving loose and give thanks with all your heart.

All ten lepers started with faith in Jesus. But which one went away with a stronger faith? The one who looked, saw that he was healed, and went back to Jesus again. Look, see that you are healed, and go back to Jesus in thanks. And your faith will grow. This is why God loves, and the devil hates, thankful hearts. Thankful hearts first see their healing, and in that sight faith grows.

All ten lepers believed, but only one touched Jesus. Only one heard Jesus' voice say, "**Get up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.**" That thankful leper left not only with healing, but with greater faith. And it is faith that receives the healing work of Christ. Without faith, none of them would have been healed. But the one who looked, saw his healing, and returned in thanks got to see Jesus and hear his voice again, and left with faith even stronger.

God has been amazingly and graciously good to all of us. It is true that some of us have more money than others, some more friends, some more family, some more enjoyable or lucrative work, some more skills or intelligence. But we are all healed by Jesus. That is the one gift we all have in common. And it is the great equalizer, because it is the eternal gift.

Enjoy that gift. Enjoy living with your sin cleansed, knowing that you will live even when you die, knowing you are God's child and eternal life. Enjoy that gift most of all, because it's the greatest of all. And enjoy every gift, to whatever degree God gives it. But just remember before you go running off to enjoy all the goodness of life, first go back to Jesus, fall at his feet, and praise God with a loud voice. Look at him again and hear his loving voice. And then, when you get up and go from your thanksgiving to enjoy your gifts, you'll go with even greater faith. Amen.