

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 9, 2022
“One Out of Ten” (Luke 17:11-19)

Our gospel text this morning is a wonderful story that we all know well. Since becoming a pastor, I’ve probably preached on this text more than any other. It appears to be a simple little story that comes to us all wrapped up in a nice, neat package. There’s a problem. Jesus addresses the problem. All live happily ever after. But there is a lot of rich meaning in this story. This morning I want us to take some time to unwrap it.

The first item of significance is the location of the story. Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem and were passing between Samaria and Galilee. Luke tells us that they entered a village, but we don’t know if it was a Galilean or Samaritan village. Because they were somewhere along the border, it could have been either one. Of course, it didn’t matter to Jesus, but it was probably a concern for the disciples. You see, the Jews and the Samaritans just didn’t mix. The Jews considered themselves to be the chosen people of God, and viewed saw the Samaritans as just another nation of unchosen people. Jesus was *their* Messiah. He had come to save the children of Israel. And they were correct in their thinking. But what they didn’t realize was that Jesus had a larger mission. He had come to save the Gentiles, too.

So there they were, headed for Jerusalem and the cross. On one side were the children of Israel, the people of God who would reject their king. And on the other side were the lost nations of the world, who would be offered God’s salvation through what his Son was about to do in Jerusalem. Sometimes, I think we forget that Christ is Savior of all. If others don’t match a certain standard that we – or perhaps our tradition – has set, then we can’t conceive of Jesus being their savior. But this story shows us that our Lord reaches out to the unholy, the unbaptized, the untouchable. And that’s what he did in this situation.

As they approached this unknown village, a group of lepers called out to Jesus from a distance. In this group were both Jews and Samaritans. Now remember, in the culture of that day and time, Jews and Samaritans would never have shared company. But their common despair and misery had long ago broken down those ancient barriers. Leprosy was a hideous disease that was slowly killing them. And because it was so contagious—and a serious threat to the community’s health – anyone with this disease was exiled. They were forced to say goodbye to wives and children, house and home, friends and livelihood. For the rest of their lives, these men are required to live in isolation. If anyone came near, they were to shout out a word of warning. Leprosy was basically a living death. So in the common tragedy of their disease, they had forgotten that they were Jews and Samaritans. They remembered only that they were men in need.

How they recognized Jesus, we’re not told, but when he passed by, they seized the opportunity – their only opportunity – to be healed. There was nothing else in which to place their trust. Their lives were gone, their bodies failing. The only thing they could hope for was a miracle, and with this great miracle worker within their grasp, they appealed to his mercy. Keeping their distance, they called out to Jesus – but not the required, *Unclean! Unclean!* They called out, *Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.* And Jesus did not disappoint. He stopped. His stopping not only acknowledged them as human beings – something the rest of the world was unwilling to do –

but also displayed his compassion for the horrible life they had been forced to live. Then Jesus spoke: *Go show yourselves to the priest.* Going to the priests was something that was done *after* a leper was healed. The priest was the one who announced them clean and gave them permission to return to society.

The ten men eagerly obeyed, and somewhere along the way, they found that they had been cleansed. Their sickness was gone. Jesus had healed them. Because of their encounter with the God of mercy, they were healed and given back their lives. What joy they must have felt! Their isolation was over. They could now be reconciled to their loved ones and rejoin their communities.

Can we see ourselves in this group of lepers? Isn't it our common need for God that draws us together in this community? Isn't it our common need that brings us to this place to seek healing and wholeness and forgiveness from the God of mercy? We come here from different homes and families, different neighborhoods and economic backgrounds, different experiences of joy and sorrow, to call on the One who is merciful.

In the confession we plead, *Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.* And we wait longingly and with anticipation for those words of healing and forgiveness we all need to hear: *Almighty God, in his MERCY, has given his Son to die for us, and for his sake forgives us all our sins.* In the Kyrie, we cry out in song, *Lord, have mercy.* In the hymn of praise, we sing, *Lamb of God; you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.* In the prayers, we lift up others and ourselves, and pray, *Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.* We gather around the Word proclaimed. We gather at the table to eat and drink. We splash in the holy bath.

And then we leave this place with joy and thanksgiving because we have encountered Christ in this place, because mercy has been extended to us, because our lives have been restored and renewed. We are whole again. We have encountered the God of grace and mercy in very tangible ways knowing that while we were yet sinners, while we were yet broken, burdened and bruised, our Lord took all these things to the cross and poured out his life so that we might have life and have it abundantly.

But how truly thankful are we? Does this parable give us any indication? Of the ten men, nine continue running. They have so much lost time to make up and not a minute to spare. But then there was one, one who returns, falls on his face at Jesus' feet, and glorifies God. Only one – whom we are told happens to be a Samaritan – demonstrates a true spirit of thanksgiving. He alone comes back to acknowledge the healing and offer a word of thanks. The other nine just keep running. Unfortunately for them, they don't receive everything Jesus has to offer. Because they have a new lease on life they think they have what they need most. But Jesus has so much more to give.

He tells the thankful Samaritan that his faith has made him well. A better translation of this, perhaps, is *Your faith has saved you.* The other nine receive only the healing, but the one who returns with a grateful heart leaves with the confident assurance that he is a beloved child of God, who has been given the gift of salvation, and that he can live out his days in peace and joy.

I told you that this parable was rich in meaning. It reminds us that God's mercy extends to all people. It reminds us of the importance of giving thanks. It reminds us how thanksgiving wells up in us when we have been delivered from a burden or illness. It reminds us how easily we can forget to say thank you. And it reminds us of the simple joy that comes when we appreciate the things we have received at the hands of God. But again, I ask: How thankful are we? Let's look at the number of lepers to answer this question. We are told that there were ten. But only one returned to give thanks.

You and I have good reason to give thanks. As Americans we enjoy freedoms that people in other parts of the world only dream of. As Christians we are recipients of forgiveness of our sins. And, of course, there is the abundance of material blessings we enjoy. But we have something else for which to be thankful. Like the Samaritans, we were once separated from God and God's people. And like the lepers we were unclean. But one day as Jesus was on his way to the cross, he stopped on the border which separates us from his glory. And when we asked for mercy, he showed it. Jesus healed our uncleanness and made us part of Christ's church.

Amazingly, only one out of the ten lepers who were cleansed came back to give thanks. That's one tenth. I wonder if we stop to give God thanks even 10% of the time. I don't think it is a coincidence that Luke tells us there were ten lepers. The number ten is often used in the Bible to mean a sense of completeness or totality. It probably goes back to the ten fingers on our hands. When we use all the fingers, we have a complete set of something. When we refer to the Ten Commandments, we have a holistic approach to life that is designed to keep us in relationship with God and with one another.

In healing ten lepers, Jesus offers healing to all who need healing. No leper is to be left out of the healing in the Kingdom of God. This story is about complete healing for all of us. This healing comes whether we're thankful or not. God's mercy does not depend on the gratitude of humans. Complete healing for all is the goal of God, witnessed here in the number ten.

The number ten has another significance as well. In the Bible, the people are called to set aside some of their possessions in gratitude for the gifts received from God. The portion set aside is called a tithe. A tithe is one-tenth of the total amount. The one-tenth of the leper population that returns to God to say thanks is a direct reference to the need for all of us to return a portion of that which we have received. We look at today's story, and we're shocked. We indignantly say, *Only one out of ten was grateful enough to return to Jesus and say thank you.* One-tenth seems so small. But when we look at our resources and possessions, one-tenth seems much greater. How could God ask for one-tenth of everything we have?

But my question is: How could we withhold one-tenth of everything God has given us in the first place? If we put it in perspective, considering how richly blessed we are by a God of mercy who has secured our salvation, one-tenth is only a drop in the bucket. May you and I be that one out of ten who is grateful enough to truly show thanks to our merciful God. Amen.