

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus and his disciples are continuing on their slow, walking journey toward Jerusalem. They are moving along with a purpose, as Jesus knows what awaits him, But they also are moving along at a deliberate pace; not in a hurry, but taking time for the one to teach and for the many to hopefully learn.

And, on this day, Jesus (and probably the crowd of others who always seemed to gather around and follow him) enter an unnamed village somewhere between Samaria and Galilee...and encountered a group of ten lepers. Lepers!

In the Jewish biblical world, leprosy was recognized as infectious diseases of the skin, but it was not a condition that was understood in the way modern medicine gives us today. Instead, the Jews believed leprosy was inflicted upon people as a punishment for sin. The point was that if you were unclean, you were forbidden from taking part in worship. The concept of clean was connected with the holy, and uncleanness was connected with the profane.

If your skin showed any blemishes or developing sores, you ran the risk of being considered “unclean”. The purity laws, and the purity system, were detailed in Leviticus.

If you were Jewish and had this problem, you watched your body for a few days...hoping and praying that the sores or blemishes would disappear. If they did, you went to the Jewish priest who would certify that you were now “clean”. But if they did not disappear in a few days, you were banished into the solitary company of other lepers until your skin cleared and the priest certified your cleanliness, which of course, could be never in your lifetime.

Because of this condition, you were ripped out of your identity, your security, your life. Cursed to a lifetime of huddling with other infected persons, chanting “unclean, unclean” as required by the law, remaining away from your loved ones and your home.

These lepers keep their distance from Jesus. Yet, even in their isolation, they have heard of him. And they call out: **“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”**

Today, we might ask Jesus to **heal** us of the specific disease. But, perhaps, we should consider the broader prayer of the lepers here. **“Have mercy on us”** as opposed to **“heal us”**. Sometimes we pray with too limited a vision. “God, please give me an A+ on this test”. Or “if you give me this one, I’ll never (fill in your own blank)” These lepers, though, did not attempt to “button hole” Jesus. Asking for him to have mercy on them is like us asking for “our daily bread”... leaving it up to God to fill in the blanks of our prayer and love us beyond our understanding. So what does Jesus do?

Well, he did not heal their sores on the spot, as he had on other occasions when he encountered lepers. No, he sends them on their way, directing them to “Go and show yourselves to the priests”. They are still visually “unclean”. The sores and ulcers are still there. But, they do what they’re told, and start out toward the priests. But, on their way to the priests, the Gospel tells us that the lepers were “made clean”. Their skin went back to what it was before the leprosy. Using your imagination, you can see that these lepers are no longer walking.....but running to the priests! Running back to their lives, their loves, their homes. All, that is....except one.

He knows that what is happening to him is good. But, that goodness is not ahead in Jerusalem, but behind him..with the man who responded to his cry for mercy. Like the others, he runs....but the other way. On the way back, his voice rises in praise. We can imagine hearing him, full of praise to God. He sees Jesus and throws himself at his feet, thanking him.

And, almost as an afterthought, the Gospel adds that he was a Samaritan, a double outcast. Not one of our own, but one of **those** people, a Samaritan.....the only one to return and praise God.

Jesus notices the absence of the nine. Were they not also healed? he asked. It was left to this “foreigner” to come and show thankfulness. And, the final command of Jesus to this person closes the story full circle. “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” He seems to say that while the others were **cured**, this one has been made **whole** by his faith and praise to God.

Curing can be thought of as bio-medical improvement. Being “whole” as in being saved seems more to be a restoring of meaning, hope, and wholeness. The leper who returns to thank Jesus shows both a physical cure and a salvation that causes him to express gratitude. This is what we long for... both curing and healing.

Still, sometimes in life we see loved ones in sickness and, although we pray for a physical cure, the mystery of suffering confuses us when they do not get better. Many people who were never physically cured were certainly healed before they went home to God. There is often a certain peace and hope that could be untouched by physical sickness. It is in the nature of holistic **wellness** that we also pray for.

What does the Gospel story of the ten cured lepers mean to us? What is Jesus saying to us?

It is possible that this Gospel story wants to remind us that many times we ask God for mercy when things are not going well with us. When but when we are **given** mercy, we don’t recognize it as that. It is easy for us to forget God. We often blame God for misfortune that hits. But when good things happen, we do not give credit. Perhaps this is a message that helps us to change our mindset from “good luck” and “bad luck” into one that recognizes that our God of love and mercy is much, much closer to us than we normally realize.

It is also possible that this is a story to show that Jesus came also for the foreigners, for the outcasts, for the people of other nations besides those of Israel. That Jesus comes not for the “chosen”, but for all. The Jewish hatred of Samaritans stemmed from their differing worship practices. They were certain that the Samaritans had it all wrong. Yet this Samaritan, in bowing down and giving thanks before Jesus, shows true worship.

What is this scripture saying to us?

The Jewish lepers run to the priests because that was the law of Leviticus. To them, being cured, or finding wholeness, depended upon following a formula of action.....going to the priests for cleanliness. The Samaritan leper, however, could not go to the priests as the other lepers did precisely because he was a Samaritan. The Jewish law did not, and could not apply to him.

He was free to enter a direct worship and praise of God. Free. Free to feel the personal intimacy of that heart-felt, one-on-one praise and worship of God. Our own parallel?

Think about your own list of salvation rights and rules similar to Leviticus. What are our own purifying routines and excuses? Is our individual salvation, or “wholeness”, or “wellness” dependent upon our membership in this parish, or some other church somewhere? Do we have true faith by attending church in this sanctuary, or somewhere else? Will I be considered “clean” and “whole” if I(you can fill in the blank)

Among the ten, only the Samaritan, only the one that Jews considered as religiously inferior, was able to pass this test of true faith. Only the one designated as the outsider was able to escape the disease of playing games of “insiders and outsiders”.

We are not the authors of our salvation.

We are not the creators of our blessings and wealth.

Yet only one out of ten of us remembers to give thanks to God who gave us all these things.

And often times it is not a Worshiper of God, but someone from “out side.”

It is possible that this Gospel story is one of relationship with God....of being grateful and thankful, one on one. Not only for those persons around us through whom God acts and blesses us, but also being grateful and thankful for the love of God love toward each of us.

And then, we start on the move from being “cured” into being “whole”...in the presence and company of the merciful God known to us in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit.

Amen.