

The Tenth Leper

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 17:12-17

As I was preparing this sermon, it occurred to me that I am basing everything I say today on a blatant act of disobedience. Think about it. Jesus tells the ten lepers to go and present themselves to the priests in Jerusalem in order to be “officially” declared clean – free of the disease. This was required by religious law in the Book of Leviticus. You weren’t leprosy free until a priest in the Temple said you were. So off they go, no questions asked; they do as they have been told. In fact it is actually as they are walking along that the healing occurs – the scabs go away, the color of their skin returns, and feeling comes back into limbs that had been numb for years.

Yes, off they go, that is, except for one. “Go do this,” says Jesus. But what does this one man do? He ignores the command. He does not do what he was told. When he sees that he is restored to health, he cries out and returns to Jesus. I don’t know, I guess there is one in every crowd. But he is the one – the one who disobeys – that we preach about and praise.

Many of you already know this, but let me provide some context – say a word about leprosy in Jesus’ day. It is difficult to exaggerate the social alienation and isolation faced by those ten men and anyone who was classified as a leper. People lived in dread of leprosy and lepers. Actually, leprosy was a rather loosely defined term used to describe any skin blemish or eruption that looked suspicious. A person with an allergic reaction or with a condition such as psoriasis, could easily be called a leper. What we today call Hansen’s disease was thought to be radically contagious. The result was that people with leprosy lived in total isolation, banished from their homes, from the loving touch of spouses, children or parents, not allowed to participate in worship. They were required by the Old Testament Book of Leviticus – it dedicates two chapters to a discussion of leprosy – to wear torn clothing, to cry out, “Unclean, unclean!” when they came down the street, and, in the words of Leviticus, to “dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.” Exiled from their community, they banded together, much as those ten men, in small communities of isolation and misery.

And so when Jesus, a renowned healer, comes to town, the ten lepers are obedient, do what they are required to do. They don’t come close, they certainly don’t touch him, but from a distance they cry out, “Jesus, master, have mercy on us.” In response, he, as I said earlier, tells them to go to the priests in Jerusalem to be declared clean. So they don’t ask why, they just go. Lepers learned quickly not to ask questions, to do what they were told. And as they go, they are made clean, they are cured. And that could be the end of our text...another healing story with a happy ending – those who were ill restored to health, restored to community, indeed restored to life.

But the story doesn’t end there, we can’t quite wrap this up and go out and enjoy our pumpkin pie, because one of them – the Samaritan, wouldn’t you know, the outsider, the despised one – decides to disobey, to not do what he is told. “Then one of them, when he saw he was healed, turned back...”

Barbara Brown Taylor describes the scene like this: “Nine went on to do as they were told, to have the priests in Jerusalem certify their cures and restore them to society. But one did not do as he was told. One, when he saw that he was healed, cried out and turned back and did not rest until he lay on his face at Jesus’ feet, praising God and giving thanks. He made a spectacle of himself, all the more so once he was recognized as a Samaritan, a believer as far as he was concerned, but a Gentile and unclean foreigner as far as most Jews were concerned. He was, in other words, a double outsider – once by virtue of his leprosy and twice by virtue of his non-Jewish blood – a double loser lying at the feet of Jesus and thanking God...He was one of the unclean who saw what the clean could not see, and who refused to be separated from the One who gave him life.”

The author of the Gospel of Luke is a wonderful writer and story teller who uses words very carefully. No where is that more apparent than in today’s text. We read that as the ten made their way toward Jerusalem and the priests, they were “made clean.” But in verse 15, we read that the Samaritan realizes he is healed, cured, a different word. Perhaps a little stronger emphasis, more dramatic, than cleansed. Then, in verse 19, he is told by Jesus, “Your faith has made you well.” Well...a word meaning to be saved or made whole. In Luke’s telling of this story, all ten lepers are cleansed, but only one is made whole. The one most ostracized and ignored by society is made whole. Says Taylor, “Ten were healed of their skin diseases, but only one was saved. Ten were declared clean and restored to society, but only one was said to have faith. Ten set out for Jerusalem gifts as they were told, but only one turned back and gave himself to the Giver instead. Ten behaved like good lepers, good Jews; only one, a double loser, behaved like a man in love...He is the one who followed his heart instead of his instructions, who accepted his life as a gift – original blessing - and gave it back again, whose thanksgiving rose up from somewhere so deep inside him that it turned him around, changed his direction, led him to Jesus, made him well.” Thanksgiving as part of the soul’s healing; thanksgiving as the path to new life and wholeness. Who would have thought? Gosh, maybe my mother was right when she made me call my grandmother all those times and thank her for my birthday card. The tenth one, the one who followed his heart instead of his instructions.

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving, my mind, I was a history major after all, goes back to that first thanksgiving in the autumn of 1621. The first winter in the New World had been a tragic nightmare for our Pilgrim fathers and mothers. They had buried half their number in windswept graves. But, largely thanks to the help of native Americans – remember the name, Squanto? – they learned how to farm the rocky New England soil and brought in that first bountiful harvest. And so they gathered for a feast of thanksgiving, these people who had suffered so much, sat down for a time of giving thanks and praising God. Edward Winslow had lost his wife in the first winter. But he wrote these words to a friend in England:

Our harvest being gotten in, our government
sent four men out fowling so that we might,
after a more special manner, rejoice together
after we had gathered the fruit of our labors.
These four, in one day, killed as many fowl as,
with a little help besides, served the company
almost a week...many of the Indians coming
amongst us. And amongst the rest, their greatest
king, Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for
three days we entertained and feasted...And
although it be not always so plentiful as it was at
this time with us, yet, by the goodness of God, we
are so far from want that we often wish you
partakers of our plenty.

The widowed husband, deeply aware of his loss, yet also deeply aware of and thankful for God's abiding goodness and love, made known in this new land, new friends, and in the new hope of a rich harvest. And all he has been through, he gives thanks, indeed wishes his old friend could join him for thanksgiving. Again, a thankful heart becomes the path to a healed heart and to the hope of new life.

Years ago, when asked about his religious preference, comedian, Flip Wilson, said, "I'm a Jehovah's Bystander. They wanted me to become a Jehovah's Witness, but I don't want to get involved." The tenth leper gets involved. There is no way he can be a bystander. He is so filled with thanksgiving, so filled with love and hope, that he
simply cannot play it safe.

I once heard a story about a church youth group and a Christmas party they would host for poor and underprivileged kids in their town. Santa Claus would be there and would give away wrapped gifts which the youth had purchased. So they needed a Santa Claus. They went to a man who was a leader in the church, a banker, a wealthy man who kept a tight fist on his money but who was also very faithful to the church. They went to him and asked, "Will you be the Santa Claus for our annual Christmas party?" And he said, "I guess so."

Later that night he told his wife that they must have caught him in a rare moment of weakness. The youth didn't ask him because he was generous or had the qualities of Santa Claus. They asked him because of his shape. He looked like he would make a good Santa Claus. And, again, he said yes...less than enthusiastic, but still yes.

But as the evening of the party got nearer, he got more and more nervous. He growled and complained and worried at supper every night, saying, "I can't do this. I can't be Santa Claus." "Sure you can," his long-suffering wife would respond, "just put on that silly suit and pretend. It's no big deal!"

The night arrived for the church Christmas party. He was so nervous he could hardly put on the suit. "God help me to be a good Santa Claus," his wife heard him mumble. "Dear, you're taking all the fun out of it. Relax!" she said.

He went to the church, grabbed his bag of presents, and waded in to that large group of eager children. By the end of the night, he had not only given away all the gifts, but also a good portion of his bank account. "But how could you," asked his wife. "Nobody expected you to be Santa Claus!" I guess that sometimes you just can no longer be simply a bystander.

So watch out for that tenth leper, the one who confounds us with his unbridled passion and love, who refuses to go along with the crowd, the fanatical one who loved the Lord so much and who was so filled with thankfulness. Dare I say, watch out for the spirit of thanksgiving? For we just might find ourselves filled with the gift of hopeful confidence and wholeness and wellness, regardless of the worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves. And then, as the tenth leper discovered, as our Pilgrim forebears discovered, as that Santa Claus banker discovered, when we come with thankful hearts, God only knows what we might do next.