

And One Came Back

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Luke 17:11-19

Every time I hear this story from the Gospel of Luke, I am reminded of the old story of the young boy who, upon returning home from a friend's birthday party, was asked by his mother, "Did you thank Mrs. Johnson for the party?" He replied, "I was going to. But as we were standing at the door, getting ready to go home, the boy in front of me thanked her. She said, 'Oh, don't mention it,' so I didn't mention it!" I think of the nine who were healed, but who didn't mention it. Only one came back to Jesus and said thanks.

It is so easy to trash the nine, so tempting. In fact I probably have done just that in previous sermons on this text. It is a sermon that almost writes itself. But could it be that this text really is not about them at all?

A brief word about leprosy in Jesus' day – many of you already know this. Leprosy was a dread but common affliction, so common that lepers had a prescribed social role and a religious one too. The book of Leviticus spends two entire chapters teaching priests how to diagnose diseases of the skin, how to pronounce lepers ritually unclean, and how to perform rites of purification should a leper be healed. As for lepers, Leviticus 13 says, "The one who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his lips and cry, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside camp." Says Barbara Brown Taylor, "Lepers were shunned because their disease was contagious certainly, but it was more than that. It was their pain, their loneliness, their unspeakable fear that no one wanted to catch. And so they were kept at a distance, barred from the religious community and declared unworthy of God. They were the unclean outsiders, not to be mistaken as having anything in common with the healthy insiders. 'We are not like them. God knows we feel sorry for them, but you have got to be sensible about these things. You have got to protect yourself.'

Rather makes one wonder, who is being excluded today and why: sexual orientation, ethnic identity, income level, citizenship status? Who are today's lepers? It sure seems that I hear that phrase – "they are not like us, they not one of us," an awful lot these days. Of course, in Jesus' day, no leper would dare to cross the line that had been drawn to separate them from those with unblemished skin. The term, leprosy, was applied to any number of afflictions of the skin. Yes, even someone with psoriasis could be considered a leper. It was a horrible life – a life of isolation, pain, self-loathing. Even worship was excluded.

So you can imagine what a cure meant – restoration, renewal, reunion with loved ones and friends, a return to church and God. A cure was nothing less than the restoration of life. So when Jesus tells them to go to the priests, they know what this means. They go to receive a verdict, to be declared clean, again to be restored as full members of their community. He tells them to go and they go...no doubt as fast as they can. Who wouldn't? But one comes back. One gives thanks. One becomes a disciple. Interestingly, the one who comes back is not only a leper but also a hated Samaritan. He had known a kind of double exclusion. He comes back. And it is right here that I believe the focus of our story begins to shift.

I like very much theologian Robert Capon's reflection on this text: "The ten lepers were all dead people. Whether you are talking physically, spiritually, socially, they are dead. They would love to get healed, which, in this context, means they would love to get raised from the dead, resurrected, which they assume would send them back home to a "normal" life. That's all they really ever asked for, just a chance to 'be like other people.' They assume that's what Jesus is all about, a return to the normal, a revival of the ordinary for people who, because of their infirmity and illness, are abnormal and sub-ordinary.

"But one of the healed lepers, the Samaritan, realizes real resurrection. He alone comes back to say, 'Thanks.' He realizes that his healing puts him in relationship to Jesus, and that that relationship alone has made him whole and alive again.

“All the others wanted out of Jesus was to be made well, to go back home and start over again, doing what everybody else had been doing – going to school, driving to work on Mondays, eating yogurt out of plastic containers, meeting a nice girl and maybe starting a family, with a home in the suburbs and a station wagon. And who could blame them? Later these now normal nine would say, ‘Who me? A leper? You’ve got to be kidding. Never been sick a day in life...not me!’

“But that one Samaritan comes back, not only cured but also saved because he alone saw that his healing, his resurrection, wasn’t just something for the future. It was for *now*. He was saved and accepted by Jesus now, while he was a leper, when he was still sick, untouchable, *before* he got well. He alone realized that Jesus didn’t just want to make people well, much less normal; he wanted to raise people from the dead...The healing began for all ten, not when they were healed – even a hospital could do that – but when they met Jesus who took them, all ten of them – leprosy, outcastness, deadness and all – just as they were. But only one of them knew it, so he alone came back to say, ‘Thanks, Jesus, I needed that.’” I think of the old hymn:

*Just as I am, thou will receive,
Will welcome, pardon, cleanse relieve,
Because your promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

The one comes back, and suddenly this is no longer a story about lepers being healed. It becomes a witness to God’s boundless, barrier-breaking, all-accepting love and grace, a love and grace expressed for all to see in Jesus of Nazareth.

Author Robert D. Lupton, in his essay, *From a Broken Tree*, shares these stories: “I once saw a large tree that had been struck by lightning many years before. The trunk was badly split and bent, but the growth of recent years was sturdy and straight. Bark had grown over much of the once-exposed heartwood, leaving the trunk misshapen but well-protected. How is it, I wondered, that a tree could grow to strength and maturity around such a crippling injury?”

“I once knew a young man born in the inner city. His self-concept was badly scarred from parental neglect, racism, and years of failure. His values were deformed by the survival ethic of the street and by the hurt that had become a burning core of anger. But gradually I saw new growth form a protective covering over his open wounds and broken dreams. A strong new character developed, marked with unique sensitivities and perceptions. How is it, I wondered, that a young man can grow to strength and maturity around such deforming childhood experiences?”

Concludes Lupton, “I have seen God take the broken, deformed things of this world, bless them with new life, and sanctify them for God’s special purpose. From a broken tree, God provides shade for the summer. From a deeply scarred youth, God forms a person of unusual compassion and understanding, a model of hope to the disheartened youth of the inner city. I am reassured to know that the straightness of my grain is not a precondition of usefulness to God. And I am humbled to see that out of the twistedness of my wounds, God designs for me a special place of service.” “Get up, go on your way. Your faith has made you well.”

Ten were healed. One returned and found healing and wholeness and new meaning in life. Are you that one? I suspect there is not a person here today who has not walked through a painful, dark night. Some of us have experienced the darkness of depression. Some have experienced broken bones and bodies. All have experienced broken hearts. We have known failure, humiliation, put-downs, the feeling of being pushed away, not taken seriously, not seen or cared for who we are. What does the story of the tenth leper tell us? All of us, every person here today, has been healed. We have been found. We have been touched. We have encountered the living Christ and he has not turned away, he will not turn away. We have received mercy and grace and the hope of a new tomorrow.

And so, today, this week, and every week, we say thank you: thank you for the wonder of being alive; thank you for the grace and love which have always been there and will always be there; thank you for another day of conscious living among conscious neighbors; thank you for the gift of being loved by others who know who I really am and love me still; thank you for caring enough to call me out of nothing into something and give me this splendid gift.