

Luke 17:11-19 “The Other Nine Lepers”

So this week’s text seems pretty straightforward. Jesus heals ten lepers but only one comes back to say thanks. Moral of the story? “Be sure you say thanks when somebody does something nice for you.” At least that’s what Eldora Flick told our Vacation Bible School forty-some-odd-years ago. Made sense to me as an 8 year old. Then when I was older, I was told that the lesson was more related to the thankful leper being a Samaritan ... someone who was considered an outsider in Jesus’ day. That made sense too. But I always thought, “Okay, if the hero of the story is the tenth leper ... the Samaritan who came back to thank Jesus ... what about the other nine lepers? Luke doesn’t say they had their healing taken away because they *didn’t* come back. They didn’t get struck by lightning. They didn’t get attacked by a flock of birds. They remained healed. So what, then, are we supposed to learn from this?

I think the question we should put on the table this morning is, “What does God *want* from us?” Some people say that the only thing God wants from us is to save as many souls on this earth as possible. How many people did you “save?” On the opposite side of that, some people say that God is only interested in the “Jesus work” we do in the world. How many people do we feed or clothe or heal or provide housing for? This is a serious debate. What side are you on? Social Gospel? Or saving souls? I’ve discovered that during such debates, sometimes the truth isn’t in one extreme or the other, or even in the middle. Sometimes the truth is in *both* extremes.

The story of the ten lepers is found only in the Book of Luke. It’s unlike any other healing story in the gospels. It’s one of the few stories where Jesus heals someone from a distance, and in this case, he healed *ten* people. What really makes this story stand apart is what Jesus has to say about this healing. This event is located between the region of Galilee and Samaria. This is during a time when Jesus is on his last journey to Jerusalem. He’s wrapping up his earthly ministry. Along the way, ten lepers approach Jesus. Every element in this story is important

because A.) Galilee was considered a backwoods territory and the people of Galilee were looked down upon as “hicks” B.) Samaria was populated by people who the mainstream Jewish leaders considered unclean. C.) Leprosy was seen as a visible sign of one’s impurity as a human being. So if you were a “good, devout Jew” as defined by the powers that be during this time, you would be, by law, required to steer clear of any Samaritan leper you may encounter on the road to Galilee. By society’s standards, these ten lepers represented the worst of the worst and were literally pushed away and forced to live outside of towns on the margins of society.

Now I’d say we could compare them to how people with HIV or AIDS were marginalized back in the 80s and 90s, but I’m afraid that stigma still exists even though we have become more educated about HIV. But don’t worry, because we’ve got *plenty* of folks in our time and place to make comparisons. People with behavioral issues ... mental illness, emotional outbursts, and social awkwardness for whatever reasons are often pushed to the margins. I saw an interesting post the other day on social media. It said, “Stop saying people with mental illness are faking illness. What they’re trying to fake is being well.” Then there are those who through a variety of circumstances are addicted to drugs or alcohol. And when I’m talking about a variety of circumstances, I’m talking about circumstances beyond their control. Common links here might have to do with growing up in an abusive home where family members were addicts. Or maybe victims of violence or sexual abuse who use substances to self-medicate or to escape when they are physically unable to escape. Then there are people who are injured or experience chronic pain. A lot of those folks became physically addicted to opiates or synthetic opiates starting in the late 90s and continuing until now. People who have grown up in poverty who for generations have fallen victim to others’ greed. Ones who have never experienced the security of love and nurture. Folks who, for no effort at all on their part, save *for* when and where they were born, end up being the losers. There are people all around us who know only too well what it’s like to be made to live on the fringes of society like these ten lepers.

So you can imagine how these lepers must have felt when they heard that Jesus, the famous healer from Nazareth in Galilee, was coming to town. On one hand, they've been pushed away by society so much that they're hesitant to even approach him out of fear of being pushed back again. On the other hand, they are desperate. And even though they keep their distance, they cry out for help: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Now Jesus does something strange here. He doesn't lay hands on them, or ask them if they have faith. Nor does he command the leprosy to leave them or anything like that. He doesn't put mud on them or have them wash in the Jordan River like others he's healed. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. So they did, even though it must not have made sense to them at all. Why would you go show yourselves to the priests unless you've already been healed? But that's what they did. Please understand what a significant display of trust this is. So they go present themselves to the priests, and guess what? They were clean. We don't know how this happens because Luke doesn't tell us. We just know they were made clean.

Here's where the story takes a shocking turn. One of the lepers, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and praised God with a loud voice. Then he threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Here's why this story is shocking. If you really wanted to shock and offend people back in Jesus' time and place in history, you'd tell a story where the Samaritan was the hero. Luke already did this back in chapter 10 with the parable of the Good Samaritan. And here he is doing it again. Then Jesus asked, "Wait a minute ... weren't ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and praise God except this foreigner?" The word foreigner doesn't really carry enough weight to our ears. Might as well say, "Was none of them found to return and praise God except this social and religious alien? Was none found except this member of a despised, rebellious and godless race? Is *this* the only one who can acknowledge what God has done for them?"

And if this wasn't a scandalous story already, then Jesus tells him to, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." You might

be thinking “Okay, what’s so amazing about that? That’s what Jesus usually says when he heals people, right?” Okay. But think about it—How many people were healed? Ten. And to how many people did Jesus say “Your faith has made you well?” One. So what happened then? Like I said in the beginning, they didn’t get their healing taken away from them. They didn’t melt into a puddle of goo. Lizards didn’t eat them. So what could this all mean? Was Jesus saying that this Samaritan leper was healed by his faith but the other nine were healed *without* faith? That could be a problem! What does the distinction mean?

Okay, then let’s get back to the original question I posed at the beginning, “What does God want from us?” Remember this is typically answered with two extremes: “To save as many souls on this earth as possible” or “To feed, clothe, heal or provide housing for as many people on this earth as possible?” Also remember that I said, “Sometimes the truth isn’t in one extreme or the other, or even in the middle. Sometimes the truth is in *both* extremes.”

All too often we Christians come across like all we’re concerned with is the destiny of a person’s soul while we’re relatively apathetic about their physical and social needs. But this story warns us against the *opposite extreme* of just addressing the obvious physical needs and not offering anything else. Churches who work among the poor and needy are notorious for this. They give food to the hungry, or a room to the homeless, and say, “There! We did it! Mission accomplished!” But if the sick are cured yet still lonely, or the hungry are fed yet still impoverished, and the homeless are sheltered yet emotionally distraught, then they *haven’t* been *made well*. See the difference between “healed” and “made well” here? Jesus calls us to be committed to the whole person. These ten didn’t just have leprosy. They were also social and religious outcasts. They hadn’t been welcomed or accepted by *anyone* for who knows how long. And for some reason it was only the most outcast one of them all, the Samaritan leper, who came back to Jesus in gratitude and found that “something more ... something *extra*.”

You all know by now that I'm not the kind of preacher who says, "Come to Jesus and all your problems will disappear." Because we all know way too many wonderful, faithful Christians who are buried under a mountain of troubles. But I do believe that gratitude to the God who heals us, *and* entering into a fuller relationship with Jesus is an important part of growth into wholeness. That's what happened here for the Samaritan leper. His leprosy was cured *and* he recognized it as the work of God *and* responded in a fuller way to it. He recognized where his healing came from and returned to worship God and to give thanks. And Jesus said that *what* made him well? His *faith* made him well. The Holy Spirit is at work everywhere, calling people towards wholeness. Some respond, some don't. We are all being called to wholeness, both as individuals and as a community, and we are being called to be *part of the offer* of healing *and* wholeness to others. After all, we are God's hands and feet in this world. Or at least we try. Sometimes harder than others and with varying degrees of success.

I guess for me, this story says, "The answer to the question about what God wants from us is in the *whole package*." Don't measure success by the number of people who come back to say thanks. Jesus does not downplay the value of having someone's physical needs healed. God desires our healing and growth at *every* level, and anything accomplished at the level of basic physical needs is life giving and liberating and therefore an act of partnership with God who is the giver of life. But hopefully there are times when we can nurture that progress and encourage people to broaden it to every area of their lives. Just as we have found greater fullness of life in responding to the fuller offer of God's goodness and love, so also we hope to become a community of healing in which people can hear the Spirit's call to wholeness and find the support and inspiration they need to respond to that call. Are we that kind of community? I can't answer that. I can only answer for myself. You need to do this too. You need to answer that for yourselves. When *you* figure that out, only then can *we* ask if we're that kind of community.