

TEN LEPERS and THE GRATEFUL OUTSIDER

18th SUNDAY OF PENTECOST – 13 SEPTEMBER 2019

The three years of Christ's public ministry were almost complete and the time of his death was near, and so in Luke 9:51 we find Jesus heading toward Jerusalem with His disciples and a group of converts who had become his followers. He was coming down from the north, and verse 11 says "he chose to travel along the border between Samaria and Galilee". It is not really as important to know where these places are on the map as it is to understand the significance of this statement. The Jews considered this pagan country; they considered Samaritans to be "half breeds." Why? The Samaritans were Jews who had intermarried with other people groups, and so were no longer full-blooded Jews. This had caused a lot of tension over the years. In the Gospel of John, it is said, "The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans".

But then Jesus the pilgrim, the itinerant preacher comes along, continuing His destined journey toward Jerusalem. He continues to eliminate the differences or inequalities which men have created. Despite their skepticism even rejection, He continues on the long and painful road of the periphery toward the capital city, from a religion closed in upon itself toward an open religion which knows how to accept others as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same Father. As He walked along, he told the story about the Good Samaritan; we saw him having conversations at a well with an adulterous Samaritan woman, and here in Luke 17, we see him walking the border—one of the dividing lines between two groups of people who hate each other. Here, Luke gives an account of the cure of ten lepers, in which only one thanks Jesus. And **he** was a Samaritan!

I'm not sure you all know what leprosy is. It is a dreadful disease. Leprosy destroys the body's nervous system. Leprosy causes the whole body to go numb. When someone is blind, they cannot see; when someone is deaf, they cannot hear; when someone has leprosy, they cannot feel.

Being blind and deaf never killed anyone, and by definition, having leprosy never killed anyone either. But imagine what your life would be like if you had leprosy. Sometimes a leper would be cutting vegetables for supper, and would accidentally cut off a finger and not even know it

because they had no feeling. Sometimes, a leper would be sleeping by a fire, and would roll too close to the fire and burn off their foot without ever waking up. In the extreme cold, a leper **would freeze his fingers and toes without ever knowing it.**

So, a leper does not die from leprosy, but from the damage that is done to the body. This severe type of leprosy is caused by bacteria. Dr. Paul Brand is the modern, world-renowned expert on leprosy, and gives us some wonderful insight in a modern, up-to-date look. It's called Hansen's Disease, HD. It is cruel and Hansen's Disease's numbing quality is precisely the reason it is so horrible. Through biblical record, we learn that people believed any serious sickness came as a result of sin. And leprosy, of all things, **so** horrific, was considered a perfect picture of sin and viewed as a divine curse or punishment. The judgment of sin causes us to lose all **spiritual feeling** just as leprosy causes its victims to lose all physical feeling. Sin causes our hearts to become hard and our conscience to become seared so that we perform and witness the most evil and depraved acts of humankind, and YET feel **nothing** but a detached disinterest. **But back to the story.....**

These ten lepers who were excluded, marginalized, despised, and had no right to live with family were standing at a distance, and no doubt shouting "Unclean! Unclean! to identify themselves as was required as the group approached. They must have heard about the healing power of Jesus because when they saw who it was, they changed that call and instead shouted: "Jesus, Master! Have mercy on us!" By means of crying out they expressed their faith in Jesus and their **hope** for the cure that would bring them back to wholeness and give them purity... – to feel again accepted by God, to address Him and to receive the blessings promised to Abraham. Jesus' response to their shouts was, "Go and show yourselves to the priests!" According to ancient Levitical law only a priest could pronounce them clean. Priests had to verify the cure and bear witness to the purity of the one who had been cured. Their request and this response from Jesus demanded great hope, faith and obedience because the men must go show themselves without first having experienced the healing. While they were going, they were healed. They, who were outcast, who had no hope, who had no future to look forward to, now had received their lives back! Notice, Jesus does not touch them as he had the leper of Luke 5:12-14. Jesus heals them from a distance. The prospect of normal life has returned to the ten through the messianic work

of the Master. This cure recalls the story of the purification of Naaman the Syrian read as our 1st lesson this morning. The prophet Elisha orders the man to go and wash in the Jordan “seven times”! Naaman with some cudgeling **had** to trust and **act** upon the word of the prophet. Jesus ordered the ten lepers to present themselves to the priests. They had to believe in the word of Jesus. They had to go as if they had already been cured when in reality their bodies continued to be covered with leprosy. It happens that along the way their cure takes place. Naaman needed to dip himself in the river seven times to effect **his** cure and he did. So is the power of faith and obedience!

“One of them, seeing himself cured, turned back praising God at the top of his voice, and threw himself prostrate at the feet of Jesus, thanking him. The man was a Samaritan. **Statistically**, this account of only 1 returning to give thanks is true. Realize that when you serve others - only about 10% will thank you. **Acknowledge** this or else you are in for a **big** disappointment. Serving others is a thankless task. This is why we serve God rather than men, because, we know that God **always** sees, and He will thank us when we stand before Him, even if humans do not. Now, the **other** side of this coin is also true. Though only 10% will thank **you**, make sure that **you** are in the 10% that thanks others. When someone does something good for you, or nice to you, thank them! Send a card. Give them a plate of cookies or just call on the phone and tell them how much you appreciate them.

Jesus observes the scene and questions: “Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they? Has no one come back to give praise to God except this foreigner?” Naaman, the Syrian, again appears in Luke 4:27, when Jesus provokes anger among his listeners by reminding them that, although there were many in Israel with "leprosy," only the foreigner Naaman was healed. Why did the others not return? Why only the Samaritan, the foreigner, the marginalized outcast? In the opinion of the Jews of Jerusalem, the Samaritan did not observe the law as he should. And among the Jews the tendency was to observe the law in order to merit, deserve or acquire justice. Thanks to the observance, they already had accumulated merits and credit before God, they believed. Gratitude and gratuity do not form part of the vocabulary of persons who live their relationship with God in this way. The Samaritan represents the person who realizes he has no merits or rights before God. Everything is grace, beginning with the gift of one's own life!

And the other nine...Are they to be faulted for carrying out Jesus' orders? Could it be that since it was the **Law** to be proclaimed clean by the priest, they, like the Pharisees, focused adherence to the Law above gratitude? Here, in this parable, Jesus, presents a Samaritan as a model of gratitude and of love which must have been quite shocking to the Jews, because for them, the Samaritans as pagans were of no value. Religiously and socially defiled in every way with no family, no job, no friends, no worship, no hope, they were portrayed as walking illustrations of sin, of divine judgment; theirs was a horrific life. Little wonder that when Jesus came to their village, they cried out to Him collectively. In today's society **our** poor are those who fulfill the role of the Samaritan. They are frequently held in disdain – considered less than, and language used to describe them is often derogatory. The Good News of Jesus is addressed in the first place to the persons of these groups who were considered unworthy to receive it. The salvation of God which reaches **us** through Jesus is purely a gift. It does not depend on the merits of any one and helps us to rediscover this dimension of gratitude in life. On this point, the Samaritan gave a lesson to the Jews. Everything that we receive should be considered a gift from God who comes to us through our interactions with others. In Luke, ten lepers did not shrink back from their hope to be part of their community... again. But one of their number had a double burden. He was a leper and a hated ethnic enemy of the community - that of the upper-class - He was a Samaritan. His extreme isolation helped him see who Jesus really is and look at what he does with that recognition. He comes back and he does three things. (1) "Glorifies God with a loud voice." Perhaps a voice that now was able to do what it hadn't been able to do for years. No more squeaky, raspy, leprosy-affected larynx. Now he could cry out with new vocal chords. (2) He falls on his face at Jesus' feet and (3) he worships Jesus. The same was true for Naaman, who now standing before the prophet Elisha confessed: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel"

Gratitude is a theme which is typical in the Gospel of Luke. In it we are challenged to live in/with an attitude of gratitude and praise to God for **everything** we receive from Him. As examples, Luke gives us several canticles and hymns which express this experience of gratitude and of thanksgiving such as Mary's Magnificat, Zacharia's Song of Praise, the Gloria in Excelsis (song of the angels) which we sing at the Eucharist and Simeon's song which is sung at our Evening Prayers.

Brothers and sisters, we have here an amazing story of border crossings, compassion, tenderness, mercy and of divine goodness. It is an amazing story of messianic power to reverse a terrible scourge, to bring it to a screeching halt and restore fully all ten people to their pure and whole condition. As in the case of all of Jesus' miracles, this was instantaneous and complete. Sadly, it is also an astounding story about ingratitude. But it is **also** a wonderful story, more importantly, of hope, faith, obedience, gratitude, worship and salvation.

I ask each of you to ponder with me...: How do you fit into this story here at CHT? (Pause a moment....) **MY** prayer is: May God help each one of us to continue to be a pillar of grateful thanks for His **Amazing** Grace on which this place is built and sustained. **AMEN**