
“One Turned Back”

Luke 17:11-19

November 23, 2014

I want to tell you a story this morning -- a story from the gospel of Luke -- the story that we just heard. A first-hand telling from one of the disciples who was there....

Relax, and let the story to speak to you as it must have spoken to the people who were there, people like you and me - who were following Jesus Christ to learn from him the way of life.

We were heading with Jesus to Jerusalem. We had taken the old border road that ran between Samaria and Galilee, and it was hot.

It was the kind of day when the dust of the road lies thick on the bushes, and puffs up around your feet with every step you take. It was the kind of day when the sweat runs down into your eyes and turns the grime on your face into streaks of mud.

For a while the only sound that any of us heard was the droning buzz of the insects as we walked, but then through the still of that day, first in the distance, then closer and closer, we heard them: "Unclean, unclean, unclean".

We began to look around, and finally, as we rounded the crest of a hill to begin the long walk down to the village in the valley below, we saw them.

They were standing off the road a bit, and as we walked towards them their cries, "Unclean, unclean, unclean" stopped. There were ten of them. Even if we hadn't heard their cries we would've had no problem knowing what they were.

Some of them had rags wrapped around their hands; others had their feet bundled up in strips of old cloth. Dressed in the torn and tattered clothing that all people in their condition were required to wear, they also, as they were supposed to, had long unkempt hair.

There was no mistaking what they were - they were lepers, and at the sight of them standing there, just off the path, staring at us like hungry and wounded animals, we stopped.

None of us wanted to get any closer to those wretched creatures - and who would blame us for that. I mean everyone knows about leprosy, right? It's awful. No one recovers from it; it slowly rots and destroys the body. Worse yet, it's so easy to catch.

That's why the priests insist that everyone who has a blemish report for an examination. The priest looks at them, and if they have raw patches, or white bumps, or red marks on their skin, or if their hair is discolored, he pronounces them unclean, and the person has to go isolate themselves for seven days so no one else is at risk.

It's got to be hard for those people, wondering for seven days if they have leprosy; wondering if they'll ever be able to live with their families again.

But it is fair. It's fair for the rest of us; it's fair for their families, because leprosy's not good -- not good at all.

Most of the time the person doesn't have it -- they go back to the priest after seven days, their blemish has healed. They're pronounced clean and they're allowed to return to their families.

But for others, for those like the ten we saw that day, their blemish is worse, the color of their sores is brighter, or more of their flesh is infected, and they are banished.

They are declared unclean, forever -- unable to have normal human contact; unable to bounce their children on their knees; unable to hug their wives or husbands; unable to do anything that might cause someone else to catch what they have.

Imagine, if you can, living the rest of your life in a hovel, in a camp; spend all your time only with those who are suffering -- diseased like you.

It's hard to think about it - not being able to see anyone you love except from a distance, only being able to talk to them by yelling to them.

After a while everyone you know would stop coming to visit, or have anything to do with you. No one, despite their claims to love you, will ever hug you, or kiss you, or touch you. Ever. No one can even bear to look at you.

No one, that is, except the others who are like you, whose bodies are twisted, shortened, and rotting.

Imagine too, waiting to see what will happen to you; waiting to see if it will spread in you like it does in others, taking your fingers, your toes, destroying your face – your nose, and your mouth, leaving you to starve, or die from some infection...

After you've have lingered for several years.

Imagine waiting - and hoping - trying to hope, trying to hope for that one-in-a-million chance; that your sores will clear up -- that you will be able to go to the priest and hear him say that beautiful word over you -- CLEAN.

Imagine what it means to have to go around in rags and clothing that's torn and tattered. Imagine how hard it must be to let your hair grow, and never be allowed to comb it. Imagine how it must feel to have to cry out "unclean, unclean, unclean" whenever you come near anyone.

That is what leprosy is all about. No one in their right mind would go anywhere near it.

That's why we stopped on the road when we saw the lepers that day. We were just being cautious, like any right thinking person would be if they thought their lives were at risk. We stopped.

We wondered what Jesus would do, because Jesus, against all common sense, never seemed afraid of lepers. We saw him touch once! A leper -- who came to him and begged to be healed, and Jesus touched him! He said "be clean," and the man was healed.

It was quite the event, and I figure the ten lepers we met that day must have heard about it because as we started back down toward the village, they spotted the teacher and began to call out to him, “Jesus, Master, Have mercy on us!”

When Jesus heard them he stopped, and as we stood with the sun beating down on our heads he turned towards them, and holding out his hands he shouted, “Go! Show yourselves to the priests!”

They must have wondered what Jesus meant. They must have thought he was crazy - – I mean -- the chance of being healed of leprosy is so rare.

They must have wondered, but they must have hoped as well. They must have believed that Jesus had done something for them; that their one-in-a-million chance for a normal life just might have come to pass, because all of them turned and started down the road ahead of us into the village.

As we watched them go, the dust rising from their tracks as they hurried ahead of us, we began to realize that Jesus had healed them.

Why else would he have told them to show themselves to the priests?

We knew that anyone who was healed of a skin disease was required to be pronounced ‘clean’ by a priest, and we marveled that Jesus, with just a word, could heal ten people. But we found out just a few minutes later, it was so.

We were told later that as they went down the hill their sores began to dry up, and their blemishes began to disappear. With every step they took towards their old home, they felt stronger, younger, more energetic, until, when they had rounded the final turn on the way into the village, they were completely healed.

It must have been an incredible walk for them, think of it - after all their suffering -- all of sudden, at the word of a stranger, their loneliness, their pain, their isolation... began to evaporate.

With every step it become more and more apparent that they play with their children again, and make love to their wives and work with their brothers and relatives in the fields and stables of their old homes.

We saw one of the lepers again. It must have been about fifteen minutes; after he and the others had disappeared down the road to the village that he came back up the road to us. We could tell something had happened to him while he was still fairly far off.

The wary, cautious shuffle of the leper was gone, he was striding up the hill towards us, singing and laughing and saying over and over again, "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

As he got closer we could see that he was completely cured! His skin, what could be seen of it thru his tattered rags, was pink and glowing with health. When he got close to us he singled out Jesus, and still singing, "Alleluia, Alleluia," he ran over to Jesus and threw himself down at his feet and thanked him over and over again till finally Jesus touched him, looked at us and at him, and said, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?"

At first we didn't know what He was talking about, but then we noticed that the man at Jesus' feet had the accent of a Samaritan, those people that hate us, and refuse to worship the right way, and sacrifice to God like we do...

And as we wondered what Jesus meant, he looked down at the Samaritan and said, "Rise and go, your faith has made you well." And the man got up and went on his way, still singing and praising God.

We stood there a minute thinking and wondering, we wondered if Jesus was angry at the other lepers for not coming back and not thanking him and God for giving them their lives back. We wondered if Jesus was trying to tell us something about himself, or about Samaritans.

It was a strange saying - but one thing was certain, all ten men had been cured of leprosy, Jesus had said so, but it seems to me that the one man, the one who came back to us and thanked Jesus, had something even more special happen to him.

He wasn't just cured. He was made whole.

The others who were there that day thought the same thing, and as we talked about it together we asked each other if Jesus was trying to tell us that there is something special about giving thanks.

And we all got to wondering about how we might have behaved if we had been given our lives back the way the lepers had that day?

Would we have been like the one who turned back? Or would we have been so happy that we, like the other nine, would rush through the formalities with the priests, and hurry back to our homes and our normal lives.

We asked ourselves and each other if we had ever really thanked God for what we have, or if we had done all our lives what so many do; if we had simply gone to the priests and the temple at the times prescribed by the law, made the offerings and said the prayers that we're supposed to say, and returned to our homes to carry on as before.

We wondered -- were we like the nine lepers who were cleansed? Or were we like the one who turned back -- the one who was cleansed, and because of his faith, because of his gratitude and humility, was made whole?