

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, October 14, 2007
10:30 a.m.

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 17:11-16

“Twice Healed”

Luke 17:11-19

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As our scripture story opens, Jesus has been traveling toward Jerusalem for nine chapters. The location is imprecise, “somewhere between Galilee and Samaria,” between the land of legitimate Jews and despised ones, a symbolic place perhaps where the line between insiders and outsiders is indistinct.

*12*As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, *13*they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’

At the first signs of disease, lepers were required by Jewish law to present themselves to the priests to be publicly declared “unclean” --indeed, the Book of Leviticus devotes two whole chapters to the subject of skin diseases and uncleanness. In Christ’s day, lepers could not live in a town; they were relegated to open villages. They would tear their outer garments as a sign of deep grief, perhaps a lamentation for their own living deaths. Worst of all, lepers could not be touched, nor could they speak to anyone, or receive or return a salutation, since that would have involved a human embrace. In short, lepers were untouchable, and though their bodies rotted from the outside-in, their real suffering was interior. Full of shame, alienation and isolation, their *spirits* decomposed from the inside-out.

*14*When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean.

The healing miracle here is stunning. Not only does Jesus cure ten people at once, he understands deeply that healing their bodies is not enough. “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” he says. Obtain the legal absolution that will reunite you with your community.

¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

Nine of the ten lepers are so eager to reach the priests they neglect to acknowledge the real source of the miracle. One turns back, however, and prostrates himself at Jesus' feet. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus uses those disparaged by society as exemplars of righteousness.

¹⁷Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?' ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' ¹⁹Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

"Your faith has made you well," in Greek SODE-zo, meaning to save someone, to keep them safe and sound, to rescue them from destruction, not just in body but in soul.

I love this story of the ten lepers; it's accessible, it's vivid, it's helpful. Here we have the tale of ten men, nine Jews and one Samaritan, normally enemies, yet united in their misery as outcasts. In an amazing act of desperation and faith, they cry out to Jesus for mercy, knowing all the while that they don't deserve it, that illness in ancient times is a sign of God's punishment. In the culture of the day, these suffering lepers do not merit redemption, yet they ask Jesus for it anyway. And what does Jesus do? He responds with not one healing but three (I am one healing short in my sermon title). In seven short verses, Luke teaches us three steps for healing—three lessons that are relevant to where we are as a church today.

1. Reconciled to ourselves

Stronger sense of identity and worth

Small is sensational

Why we are Christians: we are created by a creative creator

2. Reconciled to one another

Stronger sense of relational health

Civility, gratitude, hospitality, compassion

3. Reconciled to God

Stronger sense of spiritual health

What undergirds our work

Following the energy – following God's spirit

Trust

Ability to be spontaneous, to pass budgets that don't balance

At first blush, Luke's story of the ten lepers looks easy, doesn't it? Every one of us at one time or another has been a victim of ingratitude. Whether it's a son, daughter, parent, sibling, friend, neighbor, pastor, teacher, boss, co-worker, you name it . . . someone at sometime has spurned our best efforts to be kind, someone has ignored an act of heartfelt generosity. And though we are supposed to forgive those who trespass against us, the truth is, ingratitude hurts; it makes us crazy!

Consider the mom who, after running her children around frantically all day, faces a toddler screaming "more, more, more!" Consider the dad who after working all day comes home to a distracted family: "You mean you didn't pick up the milk like I asked you to?" Consider the adult daughter who spends hours each week caring for an elderly mother who only wants to know why she's not as perfect as her sister in California. Or the boss who after thirty hours of overtime wants to know why your report has three spelling errors. The list goes on.

Simple gratitude, that's all we want, isn't it, just some acknowledgement that what we do for others is appreciated, a nod in our direction that says, "I noticed." And so we could say that the cleansing of the lepers is Jesus' way of saying "Don't forget those thank you notes, don't forget to acknowledge someone's effort, someone's kindness, someone's care." And that would be right and good. As I can personally attest, your thoughtfulness and thankfulness are what keep me going week in and week out.

But Jesus, my friends, has something far deeper in mind for us this morning for all of the lepers were reconciled with their bodies, and all were reconciled with their communities, but only one was reconciled with God. In seven short verses, Luke spins a tale of courage and compassion and faith that is an example for us all.

I wonder as I contemplate today's story if we can truly appreciate the courage it took for those ten lepers to cry out to Jesus? Sick, destitute, ostracized from their friends and families, what kind of faith must they have had to beg for Christ's mercy? Remember, illness in ancient times was a sign of divine punishment; on what grounds could they possibly deserve redemption? Who was this man Jesus to heal even the most wretched of God's alleged sinners?

When I was in Ghana, I will never forget the morning we spent at the leper colony. I remember how terrified our teens were of contracting some disease, I remember their courage in reaching out to these how some, scared the teens . Founded as a Christian ministry, it was a place of refuge for those ostracized with horrible skin diseases. Thanks to the miracle of modern antibiotics, the residents have all been cured, but, here's the thing, they have chosen to remain in the community, scarred and crippled, they draw strength from one another. the scarred and stooped, knarled, stooknarled and , it had become home reflected the our trip to the leper colony, met a young woman in the village of Kpenoe who had been shunned after the birth of an illegitimate child. for the Do you understand why in their desperation they cried out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Do you understand why Jesus' heart burned with compassion for these men and possibly women? Do you understand why he sent the lepers to the priests, the only individuals in Jewish society with the legal authority to lift the ban on their alienation? Do you understand why being declared "clean" meant far more than being healed; it meant being reunited with one's community; it meant coming back to life from the dead, rekindling one's whole sense of worth? It meant liberation from a life of shame and isolation. This is the gift Jesus gives ten lepers as he passes from Galilee into Samaria.

But here is the rub. Nine of the ten lepers are so eager to reach the priests they neglect the one big thing, the very thing that will complete their healing, that reconnects them, not just to the human race, but to God--and that is gratitude. Sure the priests will consummate their cure in the legal sense of the term, but in the absence of thankfulness they are never really healed at all. It takes a Samaritan, an outsider and enemy of Israel, to turn back, prostrate himself at Jesus' feet and praise God with a loud voice! This soul, reunited not only with humankind but with God is the one who is truly saved. "Your faith has made you well," in Greek SODE-zo, meaning to save someone, to keep them safe and sound, to rescue them from destruction, not just in body but in soul. Indeed, no matter our distractions or priorities, it is our *faith* that makes us all well in the end.

Now I am going to speculate that you, like me, have at one time or another been a perpetrator of ingratitude, the source of someone else's angst, someone else's disappointment. To my horror, I recently discovered a lost page of wedding gifts Bill and I had received that went unacknowledged. I pray with all my heart that the individuals in question will still speak to me.

As I look out over this congregation today, I see only a portion of our members, maybe the math works out to be one out of ten, I think it's more than that! Week in and week out I discover that the church's competition is life. And I could focus on that. I could and I occasionally do, and when I do it makes me frustrated and discouraged. I have known salvation and I have learned gratitude and I cannot imagine too much getting in the way of my faith. So I find myself wondering "What of God's word haven't I spoken?" or "What of God's word hasn't been heard?" But I know in my heart that it's not about me or this church or institutional religion in general--in the end it is just life getting in the way, calling us here and calling us there. We fully intend to worship, to say thanks to God when we get a minute. We really do.

I don't dwell on the nine lepers anymore because this is what Jesus teaches us, because we are all citizens of this crazy world. Jesus teaches us that one person turning back is enough. One person out of ten who makes the time to kneel at Jesus' feet is enough to keep the Christlight alive. It won't burn as brightly as all ten to be sure, but it will burn. You, my friends, are enough. You are enough to keep this church alive. It won't be the church with pizzazz we sometimes imagine, but Christ will be present here for all who come to pray or praise. I do expect Jesus is startled that we live in a culture that is too busy for God, where Sunday worship has become a drive-by affair, an "I'll drop in when I have some free time" endeavor.

But I won't be preaching that message much anymore. I want to go on record as being grateful for you and for whatever combination of souls turns up each week because something momentous or something mundane tells you that this Sunday God in your life must be praised.

One grateful leper learns the real secret to salvation--take nothing for granted. Appreciate every act of grace sent your way. Make time for God. Make time for gratitude. Make time for giving. Make time for living. One thankful leper is enough. It will have to be.

Before I close, I'd like to tell one last story. It is about a wonderful friend who passed three years ago this month. His name is Robert William Crane who after six months of hospice died in the farmhouse in which he was born seventy four years ago. His funeral was Wednesday morning at the East Washington, NH cemetery. It was a perfect day. Beautiful stone walls framed the graveyard. The

grass was that emerald green color it turns in autumn. The sky was brilliant blue and cloudless. A simple breeze sent showers of crimson leaves cascading down upon my Book of Worship as I spoke to the four hundred, that's right, *four hundred* people, who gathered to bid Bob farewell.

What was it about this plain farmer that inspired that kind of devotion? He wasn't a learned person in the bookish sense of the term; he had no wealth or prestige. He was simply a maple sugar man who baled hay in summer, harvested corn in fall, cut wood in winter and tended livestock year-round. He ran the highway department, raised five children, adored his wife and most of all, he knew more about what makes a good life than any nine people I know.

Bob was that tenth leper, the one God kept healing from a bad heart, yet who always, *always* turned back to kneel and say thank you not only to his friends and family, but to "his maker" as he would say. His days were one lifelong song of praise. This man knew that gratitude spoken in a loud voice is everything. And the legacy he leaves with those who knew him is eternal.

You, my friends, have that Christlight within you. You have come here today to brighten up this sanctuary with your love and to rekindle your faith so that you might go forth into the fray reconciled and whole. Just like that tenth leper, you are twice healed, first of your afflictions whatever they may be, and second of the burden of ingratitude that keeps us from a true sense of humility and liberation. Kyrie eleison, "Lord have mercy" we cry out! Christ hears. God acts.

I thank you for caring enough to turn around and say thank you. Now, as our Savior Jesus Christ would say, "Get up and go on your way!" and may the peace of God indeed be with you always.

Amen