

“Where Are the Nine?”

Luke 17:11-21

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This story has always troubled me simply because my parents taught me to say ‘thank you.’ There were no excuses for forgetting to say ‘thank you.’ Sometimes a verbal ‘thank you’ was insufficient and we’d be required to write a personal thank you letter. In our home, growing up, the 11th Commandment sounded something like: ‘Thou shalt remember to say ‘thank you.’

So, this story of the nine lepers who, for whatever reason, choose not to return to thank their healer, has always kept me up at night. Did they not have parents like mine? Did they not know the 11th Commandment?

Rather than focus on the nine, I prefer to focus on the one. A close reading of the text reveals the following about this fellow.

+He was plagued with leprosy, a disease considered highly contagious; thus, very isolating. Lepers lived outside the community, quarantined.

+He was a Samaritan. Samaritans were considered second rate citizens. They were certainly not considered to be role models. Thus, to be a Samaritan with leprosy was a double whammy.

+Jesus commends him for his faith.

When he realizes he has been healed, his first reaction is to praise God with a loud voice! His first thought is gratitude. We can almost hear him singing:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise God all creatures here below
Praise God above ye heavenly host
Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost.

Jesus identifies him as a man of faith.
“Your faith has made you well.

Seeing the leper in these three ways, makes the leper very much a character for our own time. His story is absolutely relevant.

Sooner or later, most of us identify with the feelings of the leper who is shunned by his neighbors, not included in the in-crowd, given the cold shoulder, considered second rate. Sooner or later, most of us have that feeling of being quarantined, as if what we have is contagious. When the lepers cry out to Jesus, “Have mercy on us!” they are pleading with the world to be more accepting of them, to be less judgmental, to give them a break and regard them as neighbors worthy of dignity, as ones deserving a little compassion, a little understanding.

In my view, this is precisely what Jesus offers them: acceptance, dignity, understanding. There is no judgment in his bones, only compassion. In this way, Jesus is the role model for the church. We are to go out of our way to welcome the lepers of our time, the ones who don't seem to fit in, the ones who seem to be awkward or fumbling or out of step with the current trends. It's easy to love the Rhode Scholar. We are called to love the leper.

He was a Samaritan. Samaritans suffered from what we might call stereotypical labeling. They were all lumped into one as if they were all alike. (To know one Samaritan is to know all Samaritans.)

When the Samaritan leper is healed of his leprosy; he is so happy and so grateful; it's as if he is also cured of the pain of the prejudice he has endured. He is now somebody. He is an individual. He is no longer identified as a Samaritan or as a leper; he is now identified as the unique human being God has made him to be. He is set free!

To be set free in this way is an awesome cause for a thanksgiving celebration! As I imagine this leper now made clean, kicking up his heals and running all the way home, I have this belief that he is not the only one who is set free. I have this belief that all those in the community who thought stereotypically are now also set free. He is free of his disease. They are free of their prejudice. And that new reality is cause for thanksgiving to become a community-wide feast, a time to thank God for the freedom that comes with letting go of all those senseless prejudices many of us grew up with.

The leper was a person of faith. That is; he was a person who came to understand that life is a gift. Jesus tells him, "Your faith has made you well." Whenever anyone comes to believe that life is a gift, then there is a profound sense of wholeness that fills a person's heart, that gives a person cause for being thankful, cause for saying 'thank you.' There are many definitions of what it means to be a person of faith. For me, it has to do with coming to the realization that my life is God's gift to me, and what I do with my life is my gift to God.

The leper cries out for mercy. He heads to the temple to show himself to the priest. He sees that his leprosy has been healed. In turning back to express his gratitude, he is really saying, "Now I know that my life is a gift. From this day forward, I will live my life as one who has been gifted by God."

He is a leper; he is a Samaritan; he is a person of faith. He helps us to see why Thanksgiving is central to our identity as disciples of Christ. He helps me to remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.