



October 9, 2022

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Luke 17:11-19

Return on Investment

Prayer: Wholeness of the sick and Home of the exile, give us grace to seek the well-being of those among whom we live, so that all people may come to know the healing of your love and new voices join to give you thanks...

There are at least three different perspectives in today's scripture reading from Luke: the lepers' experience of their disease, the one who returned and gave thanks, and that of Jesus. All of this is against a backdrop of prophecy in scripture. Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce... multiply there, and do not decrease... seek the welfare of the city ... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

You want to get to a place where you can reap what you sow, you can enjoy the fruits of your labors, this is found in community; healthy communities are made up of people who are in a position to appreciate each other, and who celebrate what each has to contribute. There are a lot of things that need to go right for this to happen, including good health. Which brings us to the subject of the lepers:

Each one of the ten had a tale of personal horror to tell, but the stories were all the same. The nightmare had crept slowly across their bodies: white patches, lumps in the skin. Then the numbness had crawled up their limbs, stealing the feeling from fingers and toes. Finally, the faces had grown disfigured beyond recognition, and all that remained of the feet were crippled nubs.

Worst of all were the jeers from the children whenever the men passed too near a village. "Lepers!" they screamed, spitting the word like a curse.

So long ago these ten had been young and handsome, healthy and well-to-do, full of desires and dreams. But that seemed like another world, another lifetime. Now they were the walking dead.

One morning, as they approached another village to beg, the crowds were cheering the name that for months had spread like a whispered wildfire through the leper colony: Jesus.

The leper-healer from Nazareth stood by the village well, not far from the twisted outcasts. And He was looking their way.

All at once ten hoarse voices erupted in unison: "Jesus! Master! Have pity on us!" He smiled – the first smile turned in their direction for many years – and said simply, "Go show yourselves to the priests."

He hadn't even touched them. The ten examined one another. Clearly, nothing had changed. Were they once again the butt of a cruel joke?

One of them, a Samaritan, turned back to the road, set his face toward Jerusalem and the temple, and motioned for his comrades to join him. "If the priests throw me out," he said, "then let the crowds stone me. What's left to live for?"

He hobbled down the dusty path, his crutch making holes in the scorched clay. But as the others followed, the miracle came. They were cleansed. Suddenly. Totally.

Nine men shouted and raced down the road like boys in a game, peeling off their rags to welcome the sunshine on their now childlike smooth skin. They never even looked back, never saw again the face whose light had dawned on their darkness – and ended their nightmare. But one man – the Samaritan – spun around, ran back to Jesus, and flung himself at His feet. Tears spilled down the smooth skin of his face. He looked up, trembling, and whispered two words: "Thank you."¹

That was written by Paul Thigpen. I like all the added detail to that story. Healing comes personally, in a specific and detailed way. Leprosy in that era was a highly contagious, incurable disease. The best thing for everyone was that anyone with leprosy would live outside of the community – and they'd need to get out fast, before they infected anyone else. You can imagine that if your loved one came down with it, you'd show them the door, but you'd be going out to take them food regularly, as long as you could. But what happens when you can't any longer? The lepers had to beg when no one came to bring them food, but not get too close. Sometimes Jesus heals people by touching them, but not this time. An elegant healing, he tells them to turn around and tell the priests about their healing, and it happened on their way there.

What do you make of this amazing story? Let me mention what this is not about. This is not a license to tell anyone with a terrible disease that they are less than a whole person because of it. On the contrary, Jesus speaks to the lepers and has confidence in their identity *before* their healing. This is not a license to tell someone with a disability that if they had faith they'd be healed. On the contrary, Jesus sees the lepers as whole people while they have leprosy.

Jesus sees whole people where we see problems, limits, and hopeless causes. Jesus finds these lives to be important, valuable, beautiful. Those who are vulnerable, are in a

¹ Lightly edited EWA

position to appreciate Jesus; do we appreciate them as they are? Or do they need to change for us to accept them?

The US Center for Disease Control and Prevention has determined that the majority of Americans (approximately 80% of us) will live with a disability for more than 6 months during the course of their lifetimes. And many disabilities are not visible, including mental health conditions. It's not them, it's us. Anyone could develop and live with a condition leading to a disability.

Today is access Sunday, a day when we are reminded to think about how we provide access and/or barriers to people as they get in and out of our church and participate in our programs. Online worship is an important point of access, handicap accessible doors, the elevator, the very popular pew cut out area for access, is often the area most raucous and joyous in our sanctuary. I see you...

As a congregation I know you are already familiar with this work. Your New Century hymnal, published back in 1995 made efforts to address this. It says on page (*lower case roman numeral x*):

Every effort was made to ensure that all hymns spoke to and for all God's people, equally. This resulted in the examination of language from racial, ethnic, and sociocultural perspectives and the review of language that could be diminishing to people with physical disabilities... It is the hope of all who labored on The New Century Hymnal that the church will discover a language that stretches the dimensions of justice and helps reveal the unfathomable depths of the God of biblical faith.

I Want Jesus to Go with Me is an example of a hymn that was changed to reflect how Jesus might accompany someone who does not walk.

Fanny Crosby 1820- 1915, wrote our opening hymn, Blessed Assurance, she is one of the most prolific hymn writers anywhere ever. Her eyesight was permanently damaged during infancy by improper medical treatment.

{When she was 11 years old she wrote her first poem:

Oh what a happy child I am

Although I cannot see!

I am resolved that in this world

Contented I will be

How many blessings I enjoy

That other people don't

So weep or sigh because I'm blind

I cannot, or I won't!²

I've given you a quote for meditation from Nancy Eiesland, from her hugely influential book, *Encountering the Disabled God*.³

The growing and dynamic disability rights movement in this country and around the world is raising crucial cultural and moral questions not simply about the meaning of disability but about the meaning of embodied experience, human dignity, social justice, and community.

I had to re-think everything I thought I knew about healing and disability in the Bible when I listened a few years ago to a profoundly disabled woman preach on Access Sunday about the disabled God. It wasn't coming together for me. How could God be disabled... omniscient, omnipotent, omni-present: all knowing, all powerful, present everywhere at once. I think of God as being more able than me – existing everywhere, knowing everything, able to do anything. Is she just seeing God through her own experience?

She talked about the risen Christ. Jesus walked around after his resurrection: with his wounds. The disciples saw him, Thomas put his hands on his hands, in the gaping hole in his side. Jesus had been walking along on the road to Emmaus with them, on feet that would have still borne the holes of crucifixion. Ouch. Jesus is one of us. One of the 80% of us who live with disability in the course of our lifetimes. Disabled by the people he loved. It was not in spite of these wounds, but it was because of these wounds that he revealed his purpose, his value, the beauty of his life. The disabled Jesus revealed his identity in disability.⁴

One Leper returned to thank Jesus. But what Jesus knew was that he had healed all ten. Which people are you seeing? Who has value to you? In this season of stewardship, may this healing miracle encourage you to see as Jesus sees – important people, valuable people, beautiful people worthy of our investment. This is the best return on investment you will find anywhere.

² She was educated at the New York Institute for the Blind. After graduation, she stayed as a teacher, where she was active in efforts to establish similar schools nationwide, and thus continued her groundbreaking work by making presentations before Congress. She married later in life, published books of poetry, and wrote hymns constantly. An inspirational life!

³ <https://uccdm.org/385/encountering-the-disabled-god/>
Also: The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability, Nancy Eiesland 1994

⁴ In John 9:1-3, Jesus' disciples ask whether the man's blindness is the result of his or his parents' sins, Jesus answers: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Jesus can raise up disciples anywhere, from the rocks even... there are a wealth of valuable and beautiful people so close, do you see them?

Questions for reflection and dialogue:

- Thinking of a time when you were sick or injured, what positive take-aways did you have from that experience?
- What does a “thank you” for healing look like in our day?

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