

“The Saved Samaritan”
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Mike Magee
Luke 17:10-19

Movement one – Why is the leper community so inclusive?

We discover something shocking in the closing verses of today’s scripture. We discover that the one who returns to worship Jesus is a Samaritan. A Samaritan traveling with the Jewish lepers. Two groups of people who view each other like Americans and the Taliban view each other.

I saw footage a few years ago of wild animals during a flood. Predators and prey occupied the same large boulder as waters rose. While on the rock the predators did not attack the prey. All existed in harmony on that rock. The lion laying down with the lamb. When faced with adversity even natural enemies live in harmony.

While suffering from a common illness, Jews and Samaritans were one community. It no longer matters that the Jews 2000 years ago worship in Jerusalem and the Samaritans worship on Mt. Gerazim. It no longer matters that the scripture for the Samaritans includes only the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible, and the Hebrew Bible includes another 34 books. It no longer matters to the Jews with leprosy that their healthy brothers and sisters consider the Samaritans genetically impure. Their differences no longer matter because of leprosy. Leprosy was the AIDs of 2000 years ago. According to Leviticus law, lepers live outside the camp and cry out “unclean, unclean” whenever anyone approaches.

It is amazing how natural disaster and illness bond enemies together. Bond together people who formerly excluded each other. Like predators and prey sharing a common rock in a rising flood. If Samaritans and Jews can get along with each other while facing a common illness, why can’t they get along when they are healthy?

A child’s letter expresses it best:

Dear God,
I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it.
Nan

Nan has trouble loving, as she puts it, “all of everyone.” But with God, anything is possible. Including radically inclusive God-like love that knocks you off your feet. All inclusive love that heals everyone, Jews and Samaritans alike.

Movement two – Why does Jesus ask, “Where are the nine?” when it is he that sent them to the priests?

Jesus heals all 10, but only one returns to make Jesus worthy. Only one returns to worship Jesus. And Jesus asks gently, “Where are the nine?” We all know Luke is the

Gospel with the most parables. I believe it is also the Gospel with the most ENACTED parables. Nothing happens arbitrarily or coincidentally in the Gospel of Luke. Everything is for a purpose. Enacted parables.

The religious person in Jesus' day is characterized by three things: no fun on the Sabbath, strict dietary laws, and circumcision. And it is not an accident that Jesus tells the 10 lepers to go be examined by the priests. Leviticus law says everyone cured of leprosy must be examined by the priest before returning to fellowship in community. And we know what the NEW Testament says about these things. Jesus says Sabbath was created for HUMANKIND, not humankind for the SABBATH. Jesus says more important than what goes INTO the mouth, is what comes OUT of the heart by way of the mouth. And Paul says circumcision of the HEART is more important than circumcision of the FLESH. Jesus tells us it is no accident that the first commandment is to worship no other person or thing before God. It is no accident that Jesus tells the lepers to fulfill the law of Leviticus and be examined by the priests before re-entering healthy community. This IS what they are SUPPOSED to do, NOT what he HOPES they will do. He hopes they will worship God and not the law. That they will worship God and not community. They will give worth to and worship God. That they will put the first of the 10 commandments first.

A Church goer wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. "I've gone for 30 years now," he wrote, "and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So, I think I'm wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all."

This started a real controversy in the "Letters to the Editor" column, much to the delight of the editor. It went on for weeks until someone wrote this clincher: "I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this. They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!"

Worship means making worthy. So yes, Jesus asks, "Where are the nine?" What does their failure to return say about them? The nine lepers who do not return reveal something about their character. They reveal that they are self-centered. They reveal an attitude that they deserve more than they get, so gratitude is not needed. The proper response to God's mercy, according to Alan Culpepper at Mercer University, is not the presumption that we deserve it, but untainted gratitude and praise. All are invited, but only one returns. All are invited to worship, but only one comes. There are 10 commandments, but the first is the one says worship no other God. Not possessions, not work, and not even family. The first commandment tells us not to make any of these our God. There are 10 lepers, and only one returns to worship God. But the leper who returns puts all of the other things in his life on the back burner. He puts the source of love and mercy first.

The nine got they wanted, but the one received more than he had dreamed of asking for.

Movement three – Why is the one who returns “saved,” and not the others?

Perhaps this story should not be titled “The 10 lepers,” but instead, “The saved Samaritan.” I think this story is not about sending thank you notes. I think it is about the meaning of salvation.

John Wycliffe was the first one to translate the Bible into English. And he translates the Greek verb $\sigma\omicron\zeta\omicron$ as healed, and calls Jesus the “Healer.” Not the savior. The healer. It is the King James version, using the newly stabilized Shakespearian English of 400 years ago, that first translates $\sigma\omicron\zeta\omicron$ as saved. Another translation for $\sigma\omicron\zeta\omicron$ is NEITHER made well nor saved, but made WHOLE. Not made well or saved, but made whole. A condition implying not just healing of ill health, not just healing of brokenness of relationship with others, not just salvation from torment, but also healing of relationship with God. Made whole. When it comes to relationships, it is God who completes us. Not each other. Not full health. Not freedom from torment. God.

Universal love and universal salvation. We get the two confused. I get the two confused. How do we know God loves all of humanity? 1 Timothy chapter 2 tells us God wants us all to be saved. John 3:16 tells us for God so loves the world. Not just Christians. The whole world. God loves us like the father of the prodigal son before the son returns. God loves us like Jesus loves and healed all the 10 lepers. But just as the father throws a party for the son who returns, so Jesus tells the leper who returns that he is the one who is well, saved, and whole. God chooses all of humankind, but not all of humankind chooses God. Not all of humankind undergoes the change necessary for oneness with God. The change from putting one’s self first to putting God first. Jesus hopes that instead of putting the law first, instead of friends and family, instead of work and possessions. Instead of all these, Jesus wants us to put God first. To return from the life of selfishness and narcissism to which we are genetically and culturally inclined, to a transformed life of humility and putting God first.

Yes, Jesus’ love and mercy healed them all, but only the one who chose to give God thanks and praise, only the one who returned to Jesus, only his brokenness with God is healed. Jesus extends an invitation, but only one responds. God, through Jesus, extends an invitation to you. How do you respond? Do you celebrate with your neighbors your good fortune? Or do you return to Jesus to give thanks and praise? What do you do? Are you like the one, or the nine?

A theologian once said, “If in your lifetime the only prayer you offer is, “Thanks,” that would be enough. Do you know what the Spanish word for thanks is? That’s right. Gracias means both thanks and grace. And grace means love and mercy.

I am going to invite you to join me in a spiritual exercise right now. We are going to pray with that 10th leper, the one who gave thanks. So sit comfortably, close your eyes, and repeat to yourself the word “Gracias.” Think about conversations with friends you have had this week. And say Gracias. Now think about small tasks accomplished. And say Gracias. Now think about times this week when you have rested and relaxed. And say Gracias. Now think about appointments kept. And say Gracias. And remember difficulties you have had this week. When you think of those difficulties, remember that God was and is present with you. That you are always in the palm of God’s hand. And say Gracias.

Conclusion

The lion laying down with the lamb. Spiritual nourishment in worship. Giving God thanks. But the story of the ten lepers is not a story about sending thank you notes. It is an enacted parable about salvation. All of the lepers are offered love, mercy, and healing, but only the Samaritan returns God's grace. So only the Samaritan experiences true communion with God. There is nothing we can do to add to what Jesus did 2000 years ago to gain God's love. We already have that. But to be in true communion with God, we return grace for grace.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...