

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 9, 2022 – The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 17:11-19
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's reading from Luke's Gospel centers around an account of Jesus healing ten men. In many biblical accounts of healing, it is impossible to determine what disease or affliction was healed. Why was the woman hemorrhaging for twelve years? What was wrong with the man who sat for 38 years by the Bethesda pool, waiting for someone to carry him first into the healing waters when they were stirred by an angel? Was the boy who was possessed by demons who threw him onto the ground and convulsed him suffering from epilepsy?

In today's reading it may seem clear what was wrong with the men – leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease. But it isn't that straightforward. In ancient biblical writings the term "leprosy" was used to describe a range of skin ailments. And skin ailments were significant with regard to worship.

Let's back up. One distinction between God and human beings is that God does not die and we do. In ancient Judaism it was believed that a person should not go into God's presence – that is, into the Temple to offer sacrifice and to worship God – if death had seemed in some way to have encroached upon the person. This might be because a person had touched a corpse. Or if the person was bleeding, since the blood of a person or animal was equated with its life and losing blood implied losing life. Or it might be because of a skin condition which caused a person's flesh to look as if it were dying or decomposing.

Long and detailed rules were written down in the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible about what kinds of skin ailments rendered a person ceremonially unclean. The priests of the Temple were the persons responsible for examining people and deciding whether or not they could worship in the Temple. This is why Jesus says to the ten lepers who asked for mercy, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Jesus was telling them, in effect, that they would be healed, so that once the priests examined them, they would be pronounced ceremonially clean.

Another aspect of the lepers' condition is that they could transfer their impurity to others by touch. The Hebrew Bible makes the implication of this clear: "Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous" (Numbers 5:2). Lepers were required to make their condition known to others by wearing torn clothes, having disheveled hair, and crying out "Unclean, unclean" (Leviticus 13:45). When the ten lepers asked Jesus for mercy, they called out to him from a distance, from their place as outcasts of the community.

Though all of this is very foreign to us and we may be critical of these practices, we need to realize what leprosy meant at the time of Jesus to appreciate this morning's lesson. Leprosy had significant repercussions regarding a person's ability to worship God in the Temple and to remain part of the Jewish religious community by keeping its religious laws. And it effectively broke a person's ties with family and the larger social community. A leper was an outcast who could only associate with other outcasts. Being healed of leprosy meant a return to all that a person would hold most dear in life.

Jesus sent the ten men to see their Temple priests. Nine of them are presumed to be Jews who would travel to the Temple in Jerusalem. The other man was a Samaritan who would travel to the Samaritan temple at Mount Gerizim. Samaritans were looked down upon by Jews because they were regarded as not fully Jewish. So, the Samaritan leper in this morning's lesson was doubly an outcast.

And he was the only man who "turned back, praising God with a loud voice," the only one who thanked Jesus for his mercy and for healing him. All ten were healed. Jesus says, "But the other nine, where are they?" Jesus receives the Samaritan's thanks and sends him back on his way. He says, "your faith has made you well" – literally, "your faith has saved you." All the lepers were healed of their skin ailments. The Samaritan was also "saved."

This encounter leads me to wonder about the relationship between trust in God, gratitude to God, and salvation. I wonder why the Samaritan was so much more thankful than the others. Was his trust in God deeper? As a man who was an outcast by birth and by disease, had he learned to rely on God because he couldn't rely on other people? Had he learned humility? Had he taken to heart the lessons in scripture about thanking God for every blessing of life? Why did his physical healing ignite his heart with joy and thankfulness and praise to God? Of course, we can't know the answers to any of these questions, and we can't know why the other nine did not turn back to thank Jesus. We can only wonder and perhaps think about ourselves.

I also wonder how the ten healed lepers lived their lives after they were healed. I started seminary when I was fifty years old. Several women students about my age became friends at school. Over time we shared something of our life histories with one another. A woman named Evette had been ill and in the hospital for a long time after surgery for stomach cancer. She was a person of deep faith in Christ. She told us that she had prepared herself for death, but at the same time vowed to God that if she were healed, she would become a priest and give the rest of her life to God's service. She was healed and she did become a priest. Interestingly, Evette was also a gifted healer.

How ready are we to thank God from our hearts when we are healed and blessed by God? I think that we need to intentionally develop the habit of thankfulness because we are comfortably situated in life. We are likely to take for granted food, shelter, and clothing, safety, and access to medical care. Without thinking, we expect blessings every day. And this morning's lesson suggests to me that this isn't the way of being truly "well."

If we realize that we are more like the "other nine" than like the Samaritan, we can always turn back. Every day we have the opportunity to thank God for the blessings of our lives. We can even thank God for our troubles and afflictions because through them we may learn to trust God and rely on God more completely and because we believe that Jesus is with us through everything.

True gratitude to God for our blessings is about more than words and feelings, though. It is about how we live our lives. It is about knowing and acting on the conviction that we have been blessed so that we might be a blessing to others. Receiving and giving, the full circle of wholeness.

This morning let's begin our practice of thankfulness by praying the Litany of Thanksgiving together (The Book of Common Prayer, page 837). We will pause between lines so that we can add our own personal prayers of thanks to God, silently or aloud.

Let us give thanks to God our Father for all his gifts so freely bestowed upon us.

For the beauty and wonder of your creation, in earth and sky and sea,

We thank you, Lord.

For all that is gracious in the lives of men and women, revealing the image of Christ,

We thank you, Lord.

For our daily food and drink, our homes and families, and our friends,

We thank you, Lord.

For minds to think, and hearts to love, and hands to serve,

We thank you, Lord.

For health and strength to work, and leisure to rest and play,

We thank you, Lord.

For the brave and courageous, who are patient in suffering and faithful in adversity,

We thank you, Lord.

For all valiant seekers after truth, liberty, and justice,

We thank you, Lord.

For the communion of saints, in all times and places,

We thank you, Lord.

Above all, we give you thanks for the great mercies and promises given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord;

To him be praise and glory, with you, O Father, and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.