

Today's story seems like what we used to call a no-brainer. If my job in this pulpit is to help you understand what the Bible says, today's sermon should be a pretty easy job. In fact, we ought to be able to just pack it up and go home early. 10 lepers were healed by Jesus, 9 went to the temple to give thanks to God, and the one good leper returned to give thanks to Jesus for his healing. We should all be thankful to Jesus for all the good he does in our lives, and be good to others because Jesus was good to others, right?

Amen.

Let's go home early.

What's the hymn?

Well, no, wait a minute. I'm not sure that we're being faithful to Jesus or the Bible if that's all we get out of this story. I certainly think gratitude is an important part of our Christian character, and there is a call to gratitude in this story. But I think also that there is something more, something deeper, somewhere else for us to go.

I guess there's no early dismissal for Ann Street today.

Jesus and the disciples have been sort of roaming through the Middle Eastern countryside, such as it was, along the border of Judea and Samaria, talking about repentance, forgiveness, and the great lengths we

must go to in order to forgive sinners who repent. These are not easy conversations; he told them their faith was not so big as a mustard seed, that virtue does not come from simply obeying commandments, that the worst punishments fall on the sinners who provoke others to sin with them. This doesn't sound like the most fun the disciples had ever had with Jesus. It sounds, in fact, a bit like a lecture. They're heading for Jerusalem, and Jesus knew what was coming...perhaps there's a sense of urgency there: if he's ever going to get through to them, now's the time.

As they were walking, they came upon a group of lepers, victims of disfiguring skin conditions, who were forced to tear their clothes as if in mourning and cry out "unclean, unclean" to people nearby, so that they would know to avoid contact with them. People with leprosy were not permitted to live with their families, to attend worship at the Temple, or to buy food in the marketplace. They were outcasts in every sense of the word: cast out of their homes, out of their worship, out of their community, out of everything that is welcoming and comforting, and into the meager comfort of being around others who have also been cast out. What a desperate way to live!

But these lepers were not totally ignorant of what went on in the polite company they were not permitted to keep. Somehow, they had learned

about Jesus, and so when they saw him, the ten lepers did not cry out, “Unclean, unclean,” but instead, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Have mercy.

I wonder what mercy might have looked like to these poor lepers. A kind word? Some not-too-stale bread, or a bit of cheese left over from lunch? To be recognized as human beings instead of carriers of disease and social pariahs? I don't know what they were asking for, but I know what they got. Jesus told them to go to the Temple and show themselves to the priests—and so they went, and were made clean, restored to health, fit for polite company again, once the priests had declared them cured.

This should have been enough. Ten lepers met Jesus on the road, ten lepers headed for the Temple, as they were required by the law to do, and one leper, a Samaritan, did not make it all the way to the Temple. When he saw that he was healed, the Samaritan man praised God with a loud voice, ran back to Jesus, and fell at his feet to thank him. If we were going to make this an easy story, we could stop here. We could say that only this one leper, a Samaritan, an outcast for his country, no less than for his illness, was able to recognize Jesus for who he was, and so returned to thank him. We could even say that this is a sign of Jesus' teaching and healing surpassing even the work of the Temple priests, and so the leper

doesn't really have to go back to the Temple. We could say, "well, isn't Jesus great, and shouldn't we all have an attitude of gratitude like that poor Samaritan."

We could say all that, and stop right here.

But Jesus calls us to more. To more understanding. To more relationship. To more love, and a kind of being made well that goes beyond the cure of a disease, all the way to the salvation of one who is apart from God. And so we can't quite stop here, because Christ has more for us.

We know that Samaritans in themselves were considered unclean because they were foreigners, and although they shared the Torah with the Jews and worshipped the same God, they did it in different places. But the Temple was a place where just about anyone who believed could come and worship God: there was an outer courtyard, where animals for sacrifice were sold. There was a courtyard for Gentiles (foreigners...hmmm) where they could worship God, a courtyard for women, and even one beyond which no one but the priest could go on the designated day. Sounds like a lot of rules, and there were, but there was also a place for anyone who loved God. And if a leper was required to go to the Temple to see the priest to determine if he'd been healed, then even the sick and outcast

had a place at the Temple. While it's certainly fair to say that a Samaritan would have been no righteous Jew's preferred company, it's not fair to say that they were entirely unwelcome at the Temple.

This means that we can't make any excuses for the one healed leper who turned back to give thanks to Jesus. It was the priest's job to enforce the laws; therefore, it was the priest's job to either say that someone was ill with leprosy and was unclean, or to examine them and say that whatever illness they had was past and they could return to their homes, families, livelihood, and worship as a fully-restored member of the community again.

To a very real extent, the power the priests held as the guardians of the law went beyond right and wrong: they held the power of belonging. They could determine who was clean and who was unclean, who was a member of the community and who wasn't, who could walk freely and who had to tear their clothes in shame and grief, and shout, "Unclean, unclean" to everyone who passed by. The priests could tell you if you were a good person, or if you were unfit to socialize with others—this is a lot of power for people to have!

When the tenth leper, that Samaritan man, turned back from the Temple, leaving his nine companions behind and running back to Jesus, he was making a profound statement about who Jesus was to him: not just the

restorer to polite company, but the restorer of life itself. That's what the Bible says: we translate it as, "Your faith has made you well," but what it really means is, "Your faith has made you whole." We might even say that Jesus became his new best friend.

Leprosy was a kind of living death; it separated people from their faith communities, from participating in the rituals that made them feel close to God, from living with their families and spending time with their friends, from making a living and bringing an offering to the Temple with everyone else. Having a disease identified as leprosy meant that the leper was no longer a full member of society. Leprosy made him an outcast. It took his life, and left him with shame and sickness, with no comfort except that of other people as sick and ashamed as he was. Lepers might have been excused for thinking that death might be preferable to their suffering.

What Jesus did for all ten lepers was to bring about their restoration, make them whole again, give them new life from the living death of their disease and isolation. This was his gift to all of them, not just to the one who turned back. The nine who went on to the Temple were doing exactly what they were supposed to do. Did they have faith? They seem to have; they had confidence that Jesus could do *something* for them. They called out to him for mercy; perhaps they got a little more than they expected, but

they knew what to do about it: the law required that they go to the Temple, present themselves to the priests for examination, and so they did.

While we tend to make an example of the tenth leper, he's the one that didn't do what he was meant to; he was not obedient to the law. Instead, he turned in his tracks, left the nine to go on to the Temple, and went back to give thanks to Jesus. Don't misunderstand me, I believe he got to the Temple at some point; if he didn't go in Jerusalem, he went to his priests at home in Samaria, because that was the way that his family, friends, and community would know that's he'd been restored, healed, made whole. But first, he went back to Jesus in gratitude for what Jesus had given him, which was more than just giving him his life back.

All the lepers received the same gift. Their healing wasn't contingent on their remembering to thank Jesus, but their acceptance into their homes and lives *was* contingent on their trip to the Temple to see the priests. What the Samaritan did, then, points to something else he thinks he's gotten out of his healing: some contact, some connection, some different relationship with God through the mercy Jesus showed him. When he fell at Jesus' feet to thank him, he, unlike the other nine lepers, seems to have some sense that here were the feet of his Savior, here were the feet of one who had done something great, here were the feet of his new best friend.

I think that the Samaritan man that day had an encounter with God in Jesus that changed his outlook from death to life, that turned his life around, that made things right again, and I think that somehow this Samaritan man was more aware of this new life than the others. Maybe because he knew that in Jerusalem, even if he were not a leper he would not be received as a friend, as an equal, as a member of the community. Perhaps that's why he turned back to Jesus: because Jesus was a friend to him, not just a healer. In Jesus he was able to find a life-changing relationship with God, something that simple obedience would not have given him. I think he finds that Jesus is his new best friend.

Now if you spend much time with me, you'll find that's a phrase I tend to throw around. Kathy and Pat Ausband brought me back house dressing from the Cheese Shop in Williamsburg, and I went home and told Ben that they were my new best friends. I "spoke" online this week with someone who helped me with a project: now she's my new best friend. My new best friend is usually the last one who helped me out with something, or shared something great with me, or that I had a really good talk with. I use the term easily: I have lots of "new best friends."

The other nine lepers may have had lots of friends in Jerusalem, lots of people who would welcome them, family, business acquaintances,

friends, even best friends. The Samaritan was farther from home, seemed to feel perhaps more alienated than the rest of them, and certainly saw Jesus a little differently than they did: he found a new best friend in this Jew from Galilee who responded with grace to his plea, “have mercy.” And this Jew from Galilee who brings life from death is waiting to make us whole, too, to hear our cries of “have mercy,” and to welcome us as *his* new best friends.

Amen.