

NINE OUT OF TEN

Sermon, October 9, 2016

Texts: Jeremiah 29:1-7; Luke 17:11-19

The really observant among you may have noticed a correlation between today's date and the sermon title ... today is 10/9; the title is Nine out of Ten. As demonstrated in today's Gospel account, nine out of ten seem to have difficulty giving thanks for blessings received.

The story is told of a farmer who went into town for a little breakfast at the local diner. As his meal was set before him, he bowed his head and offered a silent prayer of thanks. The man at the next table said to him in a bit of a derisive voice, "Hey, old farmer ... Does everybody do that where you come from?"

"No," replied the farmer. "The pigs don't."

Greg Anderson, in his book Living Life on Purpose, tells a story about a man whose wife had left him. He was distressed and depressed. He had lost faith in himself, he had lost faith in other people, he had lost faith in God, and he just found no joy in living. *(I came across an interesting observation of the word "emotion." The word "motion" is a huge part of e-motion. When one is drained of emotion, that's the debilitation of depression ... you don't want to move; you just don't want to go into motion).* One rainy morning this man decided to do something to get in motion, so he went to a small neighborhood diner for breakfast *(not the same diner as the farmer mentioned earlier)*. Although several people were at the diner, no one was speaking to anyone else; all sat in that sort of communal solitude familiar to such places. Our miserable friend hunched over the counter, stirring his coffee with a spoon. In one of the small booths along the window was a young mother with a little girl. They had just been served their food when the little girl broke the silence and said, "Momma, why don't we say grace here?" Before the mother could answer, the waitress who had just served their breakfast turned and said, "Sure, honey, we can say grace here. Will you say grace for us?" Emboldened by the waitress, the precocious little girl looked at the rest of the people in the diner and said, "Bow your heads." And one by one, the heads went down! The little girl folded her hands, and said, "God is great, God is good, and we thank Him for our food. Amen."

Well, that prayer changed the entire atmosphere. People began to talk with each other. The waitress said, "We should do that every morning." As this man later related to the author, "All of a sudden, my whole frame of mind started to improve. From that little girl's example, I started to thank God for all that I did have and stopped majoring in all that I didn't have. I started to be grateful." And apparently, it made all the difference for this man.

Luke tells us as Jesus entered a village, He was approached by ten lepers. As required by law, they kept their distance. Leprosy was a dreaded disease, and no one wanted to get near it. We know next to nothing about these ten lepers. We don't know their names, jobs, their family histories. We don't know whether they were rich or poor or influential or talented before getting sick. All that has been lost; now they are known only as ten lepers, identified only by what's wrong with them, as if the disease had consumed their identities as well. But don't forget that these are individuals with names and unique histories and families. In that group of ten afflicted men there has to be someone's husband, someone's son, someone's father, someone's brother. We are told at least one of them was a Samaritan. Normally, Samaritans and Jews would have nothing to do with each other ... unless they happened to contract leprosy. Then nobody cares about background or cultural differences or stations in life ... now they are all just sick people, bonded together in mutual support by their common need ... which, by the way *(and I'm getting ahead of myself a bit)* is a good picture of the church.

As I've mentioned when we've looked at this story in past years, this isn't just an old Bible story. Many of us have a little "leprosy" in our lives, something that is just eating away at us, something that may have been eating away at us for quite a while. Maybe it is a private failure, or a painful memory, or a debilitating addiction that you don't want people to see, and you may try to keep it covered, because you don't want to be expelled from the community. You think if others were to find out, they might not want you around. And as you look around, it sure seems like everyone else here is doing OK. And maybe you don't think anybody else would want you around if they knew how "sick" you really were. Please ... *stay put*. You are in the right place! It may well be the case right now that your need seems so overwhelming that you want to keep your distance from the church, that you want to keep your distance from the Savior, but don't. This is where you need to be; this is where we all need to be. Because we're all a little bit sick! I say that with affection and with seriousness ... there really is something wrong with every one of us here; that's why we have need of a Savior. That is what binds us together as a community and as a church. *(The people who really worry me, the people who are most "contagious," are those who don't think they're sick, those who don't think anything at all is wrong with them ... but that's almost another sermon).*

When the lepers saw Jesus, they stood at a distance as was required by law *(they weren't allowed in the village)* and called out to Jesus, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" Jesus' response was to simply tell them to go show themselves to the priests. Now, according to Leviticus 13, the only reason a leper would show himself to the priests was for the

priests to inspect him to see if he was well. As leprosy would manifest itself primarily in the fingers, or toes, or scalp, that means one of the priestly duties was to paw through people's scalps, and fingers and toes (*as I've mentioned before when we've looked at this passage, I'm so glad today we've found other things for the clergy to do!*). If he passed inspection, he would be allowed back into the community. But note: Jesus hasn't healed them yet! He just tells them to get moving, to get going in the direction He gives them. *"And as they went,"* we are told, *"they were cleansed."* It is as if Jesus was telling these sick people to step out and begin acting in faith like people who are going to be healed; to start moving toward wholeness. Don't allow this problem or this situation to define you or to immobilize you and keep you from living life! Call to Jesus for mercy, then start walking in the direction(s) He gives you! We have a role in our healing, and that role is *get moving* and take steps in the right direction.

In our reading from Jeremiah, the people of Israel are living under the captivity of the Babylonians. God speaks through His prophet and says in so many words, *"Now listen, while you are in this difficult situation, keep living! Go ahead and build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce, marry and have children (in that order, by the way); find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, do what you can to seek the prosperity and well-being of that place to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."* In short, don't be immobilized by the difficulty of your situation. In the midst of your hardship, take steps toward healing; trust in the promises of God and start planning to live ... for your own good, for the good of those you love, *and* for the good of the place where you live! We talked about this principle last week;¹ just before this story of the lepers in Luke, we read the disciples had asked Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus responded in so many words their faith did not need to be *increased* so much as it needed to be *put into motion* ... the faith they already had needed to be exercised. These ten lepers had just enough faith to get up and go, to take simple steps in the right direction, the way Jesus directed them to go ... and they were healed along the way. We are told that when one of the ten **saw he was healed** ... that's a key phrase, **he saw he was healed** ... he turned back; he returned to give thanks for the grace he received. Apparently, if we take this story at face value, approximately nine out of ten people who receive blessing from God just don't do this. Why is that?

Why did only one man cleansed from leprosy return to thank Jesus? For starters, maybe because (a) **he saw he was healed**; he recognized he really had been cured of a serious affliction he really had, and (b) he knew only Jesus could have done it. Someone made a tongue-in-cheek list of suggested reasons why the other nine did not return: (1) Maybe one thought, *"I'm not sure if this cure is genuine, if it is going to last; I'll wait and see if it'll really 'take.'"* (2) Another said, *"Ah, I probably would have gotten better anyway."* (3) Another decided, *"Huh. Maybe I really never had leprosy in the first place; I feel fine now."* (4) One said, *"Jesus didn't really DO anything ... except to refer us to some other religious people and send us away."* (5) One said, *"I'm sure any rabbi could have done it; one's just as good as another."* (6) One said, *"I was already getting better all by myself, this walking exercise just helped accelerate the process."* (7) One said, *"I might have been sick, but I also really need to lose weight ... and Jesus didn't help me with THAT. What kind of healer is that? He didn't fix EVERYTHING, there is still so much wrong with me and my world."* (8) Another said, *"You know, I think the priests healed me."* (9) The last one said, *"Hey, wow, I feel great! I'm going to go right out right now to find all my friends and have a party! I'll thank Jesus later ... maybe next Easter or Christmas Eve!"*

Giving Jesus thanks ... *genuine* thanks ... is so difficult for nine out of ten people. Because genuine gratitude is grounded in the humble acknowledgement that every blessed thing we have ... *everything* ... is from God. To truly worship is to acknowledge that everything we hold dear ... our health, our families, our work, even our ability to believe and have faith in the first place ... has come from the God who in Jesus Christ *refused to keep His distance from us*. When we really believe that, by the way, we then find we are far more patient, far more tolerant, far more compassionate toward others who may not have been as blessed as we. In genuinely recognizing everything you have has been given to you from the hand of a gracious God, you can't help but be patient and gracious with the shortcomings of those who have not been as fortunate to receive what you have received ... e.g., not everyone has been privileged to be raised in a good church, not everyone has been raised by two healthy and loving parents, not everyone has been fortunate to have had a comparatively healthy life free of disease, free of crippling accidents or otherwise free of want ... and I could go on but that's *really* another sermon. Suffice it to say for now, there is just no room for smugness in the heart of the truly grateful Christian.

When the healed leper got to Jesus, he bowed on the ground at Jesus' feet. That, by the way, is genuine worship: Coming to Jesus in gracious gratitude, bowing at Jesus' feet, seeking His direction. It's what we try to do here each and every week. Jesus told the man at His feet, *"Rise up and go, your faith has made you well."* I don't think Jesus is talking about the healing of this man's body; the man at his feet had already received that, as did the other nine. But for this man there was apparently a deeper healing. What nine out of ten fail to realize is there is a difference between just being *healed* and being made *well*, there is a difference between just being *cured* and being made *whole*. In fact, other translations have Jesus saying, *"Your faith has made you whole."* The King James Version has it, *"Your faith has saved you."*

For only those who in gratitude make it to the feet of Jesus find genuinely complete well being and salvation.

¹ See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/dont-dream-act1.pdf>