

BE THAT ONE OUT OF TEN!

Sermon, October 13, 2019

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

I love the story of the old farmer who was traveling and went into a nearby town for a little breakfast at the local diner. As his meal was set before him, he folded his hands, 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."*

Well, if we take today's Gospel reading at face value ... when it comes to giving thanks, nine out of ten seem to have more in common with the pigs than with our farmer.

Luke tells us as Jesus entered a village, He was approached by ten lepers. As required by law, the ten men 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. 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 dad, someone's brother, someone's uncle. 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 quietly eating away at us for quite a while. Maybe it is a private failure, or a painful memory, an addiction or an ailment you don't want people to see, so you try to keep it covered ... because, well, 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! 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. (*This is almost another sermon, but the people who really worry me, the people who are most dangerously "contagious," are those who don't think they're sick, those who don't think anything at all is wrong with them ... but, I digress*).

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 a priest was for the priest 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 the person passed inspection, he/she would be allowed back into the village. But note: Jesus hasn't healed these ten men yet! He just tells them 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. I think there is a principle being exhibited here: 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 to take intentional steps in the right direction. Exercise the faith you have; do what He tells you to do.

In the lectionary text 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 go on living ... 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; just before this story of the lepers in Luke, we read the disciples had asked Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus had responded in so many words that 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 genuine 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 had, and (b) he knew only Jesus could have done it. Someone made a tongue-in-cheek list of nine possible reasons why the other nine did not return; I'll just name a few: 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."* Perhaps another said, "*Ah, I probably would have gotten better anyway. Maybe I really never had leprosy in the first place; I feel fine now.*" Or, "*Jesus didn't really DO anything ... except to refer us to some other religious people and send us away.*" Maybe one said, "*I might have been sick, but I also really need to lose weight ... and I'm still fat. What kind of healer is that? He didn't fix EVERYTHING, there is still so much wrong with me and my world.*" Maybe another 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 ... apparently is difficult for nine out of ten people. Because genuine gratitude is grounded in two main things: (1) The humble acknowledgement that we were so much in need (*i.e., really afflicted*) in the first place, and (2) 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, not everyone has experienced the absence of want in basic life necessities ... 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, and seeking His direction. It's what we try to do here each and every week -- come to Jesus in gratitude, bow at His feet and seek His direction.

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.

Be that one out of ten.