

We begin today's Scripture and Sermon – one flowing right from the other.

So, Luke 17:1-10 from the Message:

Jesus said to his disciples,  
“Hard trials and temptations are bound to come,  
but too bad for whoever brings them on!  
Better to wear a millstone necklace  
and take a swim in the deep blue sea  
than give even one of these dear little ones a hard time!

“Be alert. If you see your friend going wrong, correct him.  
If he responds, forgive him.

Even if it's personal against you  
and repeated seven times through the day,  
and seven times he says,  
'I'm sorry, I won't do it again,' forgive him.”  
The apostles came up and said to the Master, “Give us more faith.”  
But the Master said, “You don't need more faith.  
There is no 'more' or 'less' in faith.  
If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed,  
you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Go jump in the lake,' and it would do it.

“Suppose one of you has a servant who comes in from plowing the field or tending the sheep.

Would you take his coat, set the table, and say, 'Sit down and eat'?

Wouldn't you be more likely to say,

‘Prepare dinner; change your clothes  
and wait table for me until I've finished my coffee;  
then go to the kitchen and have your supper’?

Does the servant get special thanks for doing what's expected of him?

It's the same with you.

When you've done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say,

‘The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.’ ”

It happened that as he made his way toward Jerusalem, he crossed over the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men, all lepers, met him. They kept their distance but raised their voices, calling out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Taking a good look at them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.”

They went, and while still on their way, became clean.

One of them, when he realized that he was healed, turned around and came back, shouting his gratitude, glorifying God. He knelt at Jesus' feet, so grateful. He couldn't thank him enough—and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus said, “Were not ten healed? Where are the nine?  
Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?”

Then he said to him, “Get up. On your way. Your faith has healed and saved you.”

Today in our passage from Luke 17: 11-19 we see Jesus again crossing boundaries and wandering where the Jewish leaders think that he probably shouldn't go, and he's healing people with whom they think he has no business healing.

Luke tells us that Jesus and his disciples are travelling through the borderland between Galilee and Samaria. These border towns had a population mix of Jews and Samaritans – likely living separately because of the Jewish purity rules. Either way, the border towns were not a place for the pious minded nor highly learned priests. This was a place for the merchant, the tradesman, the small farmers bringing their produce to market. The town likely centered around a well – with market and synagogue and other important administrative structures around the central space.

Speaking of purity laws – the Samaritan in our story today was doubly unclean at the beginning of our story. First, he was a Samaritan. Samaritans were the descendants of people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who were not taken into exile and lost – and the neighboring peoples – While they followed many of the practices and Mosaic laws of their cousins, the Jews, they were not considered to be true Jews, and thus they were “sub-people”

The Samaritan was also a leper. Now, from what I've read, what we call leprosy today is, in fact, a different disease than what is found in the original Greek and Hebrew (Logos – Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary). Many of the biblical descriptions of what we have translated as leprosy involve symptoms that leprosy – or Hansen's disease do not have. Thus, biblical leprosy – that which is mentioned here – could be leprosy but more likely any other number of skin diseases – including the common psoriasis and vitiligo.

The issue with these very discernable easily “seen” skin disorders was that their visible difference from “normal” skin was perceived as an outward sign of an inward sin. People with biblical leprosy were struck by the “finger of God”. It was believed to be divine retribution for all the unconfessed and unrepented sins. Thus, the person was “unclean” and many were made to live away from their family and livelihood.

The only way to return to “health” is to be examined by a priest and proclaimed free of the disease. Unfortunately, most of these benign skin diseases, which we now know, are not easily cured nor are they curable so many of the people with these skin diseases would have lived under the stigma of great sin and impurity for the rest of their lives.

Jesus, in our story today, met 10 lepers – unclean “God-condemned” outcast. They approached him with a plea for healing, but they also kept their distance. In response, Jesus instructed them to go and show themselves to the local priest, promising, by implication, that they would be made well.

However, I could just imagine what the lepers were thinking – “Why should I go to the priest – he will just turn me away, like he always does”. Or maybe they were like Naaman and the prophet Elisha and mutter to themselves, “I thought that for me he would at least call out to God and wave his hand over the spot and cure the leprosy.” After all, Jesus didn’t really spend a lot of time healing them – he didn’t even touch them.

But. We don’t read any of their doubt in the scripture. It just says, “and as they went they were made clean.” This was an act of faith on their part. Earlier, in the chapter, Jesus said to the disciples “If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, ‘Go jump in the lake,’ and it would do it.”

Just the fact that the men turned and were making their way to the priest to be declared healed – knowing that they had an incurable skin abnormality – was this kind of act of faith. They had faith – they trusted Jesus’ word – It may not have been a HUGE amount of faith – they had nothing to lose – but they made their way to the priest and as they went they were made clean.

Their actions and faith are, indeed, an object lesson to the disciples. It is as if Jesus is saying to them, look, even these who had no hope, can trust even with a kernel of faith.

Now, to be sure, I do want to make something clear here. I so wish Jesus were here right now – here present – in the flesh – to heal our broken world. Sometimes it feels as though even our huge quantities of faith are not enough. I don’t know what to do or even what to believe anymore when it comes to curing our bodies – sometimes they are cured – like these men were from their skin disorders – and sometimes they are not – and yet I cannot discount the miraculous healing that some people receive. It all seems a little arbitrary to me.

However, this story isn’t really about healing the men’s bodies – and we figure this out by Jesus’ words to the Samaritan man who returns in gratitude to give thanks. Jesus says, “Get up. Get on your way. Your faith has delivered you.”

I did a quick concordance check for this phrase – in Greek in the book of Luke – and Jesus uses this phrase 4 times – each time Jesus is speaking to someone whose disease and/or caste in society is perceived to be caused by a great sin. He speaks these words to the woman who washed his feet (the Pharisees ponder, who is this man who even forgives sins?). In each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus speaks these words to the hemorrhaging woman who touched his cloak. In both Luke and Mark, Jesus uses this phrase in the healing of the man born blind (and the pharisees wondered which of his parents sinned that he would be born blind).

Each person was healed – not only of their outward disease – not only of their sins – but also healed in relation to their perceived place in the family of God. These were people who were the lowest of the low – deemed unclean and unworthy to be around others and unworthy of coming before God – and Jesus proclaims them delivered.

Note that I did not say healed – but delivered. The Greek word Jesus uses in all these cases is the word, “sesoken” σέσωκέν. It means to be saved – to be delivered.

And what has delivered them? Their faith. In Greek, the word used here is “peeshees” πίστις . And that word can be even better translated to mean your ACT OF BELIEVING.

Jesus says to the one man who formally had a skin disorder – he says, Get up. Get on your way. Your act of believing has delivered you.

If we were to just have a sermon about the 10 men and their faithful actions, we would be finished now. They got up and did what was really hard and this very act of faith in the power of the words of Jesus, God’s son, saved them. They were not only cured of their disease, but they were now no longer deemed unclean and could resume their place within their family and within the worshipping body of believers.

The disciples were shown a perfect example of faith in action – a case study, as it were.

When the Samaritan noticed that he had been saved, he turns back and, falling at Jesus’ feet in a posture of worship he thanked Jesus.

The verb *thank* used here is the same one used when Jesus thanks God for the bread and cup at the last supper and it is the basis for our word *Eucharist*. Eucharistos – an expression of deep gratitude.

Why would he be so grateful? Like the other 9, he too was healed of the skin disorder, but unlike the others, he was a Samaritan. As such, he was twice scorned, twice rejected, twice removed from the community. As a man with a skin disorder, he was unclean

ritually and, therefore, isolated, an object, no doubt, of revulsion and fear on the part of his neighbors. And as a Samaritan he would have been seen as an outsider-and a despised one at that-to the more orthodox Jews of Galilee.

And yet, when he returns to Jesus, he did not keep his distance as he did before. No, he came close and laid down in humility at Jesus feet – recognizing the wonderful act of healing for what it truly was – God’s redemptive act of love outpoured through Christ for the forgiveness of sins for all people – even him, a humble outcast Samaritan. God’s love is not bound by our petty placements of people.

We’re a lot like those former lepers in today’s story. We’re too busy with the celebration about us that we don’t notice the amazing thing that God is doing – not to just us - but in our world around us.

This is entitlement. Entitlement is the notion that I am somehow entitled to things; that I owe no one anything and have no responsibility for anyone. Of course I’m going to be healed – it’s my right! Everything is my right, my due. Entitlement happens when we refuse to see that we live in an interdependent world, that the strength and the health of our souls comes as a gift.

Gratitude draws us out of ourselves into something larger, bigger, and grander than we could. But at the same time gratitude is an openness – a vulnerability – a loss of control and a recognition that it’s not about us.

It’s easy to keep our emotions at bay when when we’re experiencing the expected...when we receive what we’re entitled to receive. But there’s something about unexpected gifts of grace that – WHAM – like the Samaritan in our story today – strikes us with a glimpse of the eternal and God’s unrestrained outpouring of grace. And we can’t comprehend it and we’re overcome by gratitude.

But, like the curing from the skin disorder was an example to the disciples of faith in action and God’s power to forgive sins, the Samaritan’s gratitude is only one part of the lesson for the disciples.

Do you recall, Jesus said to his disciples, in our earlier scripture, “Does the servant get special thanks for doing what’s expected of him? It’s the same with you. When you’ve done everything expected of you, be matter of fact and say, ‘The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.’”

Jesus did not impart God’s healing on the 10 men to be thanked. The fact that he WAS thanked was an act of grace from the Samaritan.

Jesus didn't take back his healing when he wasn't thanked by the others. No. He did what God asked him to do. The work was done. What he was told to do, he did.

So – a long circuitous return to the scripture of the day. And I think I finally understand – at least in part – what Jesus called the disciples – and us today – to live. And, what a perfect way to punch in the meaning of the lesson than today's wonderful case study example.

From Jesus healing the 10 men with a skin disorder – and from the Samaritan who returned and gave thanks we are better able to understand Jesus' teachings.

1. Let us not restrain God's grace. Don't hold it back. It's better to be tossed into the raging ocean than to withhold the grace of God from one single person.
2. Forgive. Christ calls us to work on making our relationships whole – to heal our relationships even if we must return and return and return again to forgiveness. Forgive.
3. We who say we have faith in God must live it. It is through living our faith that God can work the impossible in us. If we behaved and believed – even with a minuit amount of faith, then we too, like these men in today's story, can be saved.
4. And do it all regardless of the returns – why? Because it is what God calls us to do.

Thanks be to God for the re-hearing of God's word.

Amen