

Luke 17:11-19
Thanksgiving
25 November 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

Grace and Peace to you, brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, who “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”¹

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

“And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: . . . ‘Now the leper on whom the sore is, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare; and he shall cover his mustache, and cry, “Unclean! Unclean!” He shall be unclean. All the days he has the sore he shall be unclean. He is unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.’”²

These 10 lepers, the 10 in our Gospel reading today, *they* lived outside the camp. They dwelt alone, there on the margins of civilization, shunned by polite society. And, as if the shame of their leprosy were not enough, they had to mark themselves for all to see with torn clothes, bare heads and covered faces. And they were required to bark out to all who passed by, “Unclean! Unclean!” Theirs was not an accusation but a confession: “We lepers, we are unclean! Save yourself the trouble and stay away from us.” Insult upon insult upon insult they were made to heap upon their own heads.

Even here, even in this “certain village” that Jesus entered (perhaps in the very midst of society, or at least in the “midst of Samaria and Galilee”) here, Luke tells us, the lepers “stood afar off.”³ They knew their place, and all of society knew it as well. At the very best, they were objects of pity. It’s perhaps the worst kind of exile—to live among the very people you love and who should love you, to see one’s family and hear their voices, friends and countrymen all around you, and be forced by God’s law to declare to all: “I am unclean, unworthy to stand among you!”

The closest comparison we have today is the homeless man, attired in grimy clothes and wearing the stench of the street, spouting nonsense to all who pass by or just asking for some spare change. Like the leper, he is either invisible or assiduously avoided, right there in the midst of a society from which he is nevertheless exiled. He is the dictionary definition of social outcast.

These 10 lepers were the outcasts of their day, the homeless men living in refrigerator boxes under the dark bridge in the seedy part of town. Yet, when they called out to our Lord, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Jesus said to them, without missing a beat, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.”⁴ In that moment, He proclaimed both healing and restoration. That was “salvation” to those lepers, it was all they could have asked. They were *used* to asking, begging of whomever passed by for a favor, something the passerby could spare, and they were used to being denied in their pleas.

But here, probably to their gleeful surprise, they got what they wanted—to be able to show themselves to the priests, as God had commanded His people through Moses and Aaron, way back in the Book of Leviticus, and to be found clean and to rejoin society. Who among us, faced with lifelong exclusion from

¹ 1 Tim 2:4

² Lev 13: 1, 45-46

³ Luke 17:11-12

⁴ Luke 17:13-14

friends and family, from all social interaction, would not consider those words of Jesus the most beautiful they had ever heard?

And so off they went—this mob of misfits, lonely faces now parted by broad grins, looking upon themselves and each other in disbelief at their great fortune as the leprosy left their bodies. Thinking to themselves, “Well that worked pretty well!” Off they went to the Temple, to get their papers of free passage stamped by the priests. For that was what our Lord commanded them to do and it was what they had for so long desired. Of course they followed Jesus’s command.

Now, it was no small task Jesus put before them, to journey through the land of the dirty Samaritans, these Jews, sons of Abraham and heirs of Moses, who’d just received the divine cleansing, to show themselves to priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. But far be it from them, who had just experienced a life-changing, life-improving healing event the likes of which none of us will probably ever experience; far be it from them to ignore the command of the Author of their healing. And after all, their “salvation,” their readmission to society was at hand, only one last hoop to jump through—that sign-off by the priests in the Temple. In great faith, these men set off to Jerusalem fulfill the final requirement, to be declared clean by the Temple priests.

But one of those 10, he had a different idea altogether. Jesus had commanded him, like all the others, to go to the priests and show himself. But “when he saw that he was healed,” he ignored the Master’s command.⁵ Instead, that one leper left his group of merry pilgrims, turned on a dime, and returned he’d come from. And there “with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks.”⁶ Jesus had commanded him to show himself to the priests in Jerusalem, and here he was, still in the midst of Galilee and Samaria, far from the Temple and its priests, here he was prostrating himself before Jesus—before God! at God’s very feet! giving God thanks! That’s what Luke tells us.

Those 10 lepers set off to Jerusalem in obedience to Jesus’s words. But this one leper, *he* turned back, he *ignored* the clear command of Jesus—“Go, show yourselves to the priests!”⁷ And yet, that misses the point, doesn’t it? In fact, this one leper, *he* was the one who showed himself to the Priest, to the *High* Priest, to *Jesus his God!* And he fell on his face and gave thanks!

If we were to translate Jesus’s command into today’s language, it would be something like this: “Go to church!” Well . . . that’s exactly what our one leper did. On the way to the Temple to check that final box, to get his ticket of re-admission, he turned tail and he *went* to Church. He went to the place where his Master, his God, was present. Priests? Temple? No competition for the Real Deal, the Master in the flesh. He knew that “man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.”⁸

And just as our one thankful leper had his Master in the flesh, so today we have our Master in the flesh on the altar of this church. Just as the Master in the flesh made our one leper clean, today our Master makes us clean with His body and His blood, sacrificed for us on the cross. Just as the Master spoke those words of healing to the lepers, so the Master today speaks those healing words—in the Absolution, in the reading of His Holy Word, in the Sacrament—“My Body, given for you; My blood, shed for you.” All done for the forgiveness of your sins.

Because let’s not forget what makes us dirty. It’s our unclean thoughts. Our covetousness and pride and our discontent with God’s many generous gifts. Our dishonesty when it’s just easier to tell a lie, laziness

⁵ Luke 17:15

⁶ Luke 17:15-16

⁷ Luke 17:14

⁸ Deut 8:3

when it comes to dealing with our sinful habits, and our inattention in prayer, and our procrastination when it comes to growing in God's Word. It's our *sins* that make us unclean.

And let's not forget what makes us clean. Let's not forget that a sacrifice must be made for our sins. That innocent blood must be shed. That only such a bloody sacrifice will do. When God instructed Moses and Aaron concerning leprosy, He said that any leper who was healed must offer three lambs without blemish as a sacrifice.⁹ And one of those lambs would be a "trespass offering" to "make atonement."¹⁰ So God said, "Then the priest shall offer the sin offering, and make atonement for him who is to be cleansed from his uncleanness."¹¹ That's it! This lamb without blemish would be offered as a "sin offering," an offering to God to atone for the leper's sin, to make clean this unclean one. Does this sound familiar?

Our lone thankful leper, who, when he was healed by Jesus, did not in penitence offer up a lamb without blemish. How could he? His Healer *was* the Lamb without blemish. What God commanded of Moses and Aaron—that they offer up a lamb without blemish for the leper; that same thing God Himself offered up on our behalf, to accomplish the healing, to cleanse from our sins. He offered up the Lamb without blemish; God the Father offered up the Lamb without blemish, He offered up God the Son.

And there stood God the Son, in the flesh, "in the midst of Galilee and Samaria." So when the thankful leper turned back to the Lamb without blemish, the Lamb who atones, he gave thanks. That was all there was left to do, no sin offering could be made, no way to pay for the healing, just thanksgiving.

And then, Luke tells us, rather curiously, "And he was a Samaritan."¹² This revelation seems like a non sequitur. But perhaps it's the center of the story. This lone thankful leper—one among 10 healed by Jesus—was not just an outcast from society because of his leprosy. He was a dirty Samaritan, from the other side of the tracks and to be avoided (or at the least to be condescended to). He was doubly outcast among God's ancient people—unclean in body and genetically impure.

As a Samaritan—a Gentile—he was cast out from the presence of God, a descendant of apostates, not only not one of God's chosen people, but one of those who chose NOT to be God's people. Here today, *you* are cast out from God's presence by your sin and by your sinful nature. By your lies and subtle deceptions. Your pride and your ingratitude. Your lustful thoughts and your petty anger. Now unable to commune with Him, to be the child of Him who formed you in the womb because *you* were born into sin and set apart from God's people by your rebellion against His will. The Samaritan leper, too, was born apart from God's people, unclean by birth and unclean before men, a child of that rebellious nation, a child of wrath.

But, unlike those 9 other lepers, presumably sons of Abraham, members of God's own people, the Samaritan gets its right. Those 9 others thought the only uncleanness in them was their leprosy, that once they got the blessing of the Temple priests they would be good to go. They thought their privileged birth as sons of Abraham and their good works—their righteousness—those were sufficient to make them clean. And, in a way, they were right. For their birth among God's chosen people, their observance of the law God gave to Moses, those were already secure. The blessing of the priests would restore them to good standing in society and they would no longer be outcasts in their own villages.

The Samaritan leper, though, he understood that he would never be truly clean by virtue of the Temple priests' stamp of approval. That being cast out of society, subject to ridicule, scorn, condescension—this is all a slap on the wrist compared with being cast out of God's presence. He understood that living in a

⁹ Lev 14:10

¹⁰ Lev 14:12

¹¹ Lev 14:19

¹² Luke 17:16

society where he was not a real member—better even than those 9 lepers who faithfully journeyed to Jerusalem to be declared clean by the Temple priests—he understood that was nothing compared to living outside God’s presence.

He understood that only Jesus Christ made him truly clean. That only the Master who casts out demons and casts out sin, only He was worthy of worship. That Jesus in the flesh, Jesus on His final and triumphant march to Jerusalem to take His crown and declare victory from the cross, Jesus whose wounds make us whole, “who in flesh the vict’ry won,”¹³ that only this Jesus healed him and made him clean, gathered him in to His church, into His family.

As He did for the lepers, fellow redeemed, so He did for you. In Baptism, Jesus casts out demons and casts out our sins. In Baptism, He is the Lord of outcasts crippled by sin, Brother to the lepers and the tax collectors and the harlots and us.

When this Samaritan leper fell on his face and gave thanks, he gave thanks to the *Good Samaritan* who heals us and binds our wounds with His own, who cleans us and looks always after the needs of our bodies and our souls.

Jesus in the flesh healed the Samaritan leper in his body and in his soul and He taught him that “man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.”¹⁴ “Your faith has made you well.”¹⁵ Let *us* too know what the Samaritan leper has learned—that membership among God’s people is defined not by our own merit, not by our genetics, by our physical health, or our meticulous adherence to God’s law. In all that, we shall fail and fail miserably. Rather, our membership among God’s people is defined by “every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord”¹⁶ and by Christ’s cross-wounded flesh, by the one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus.

This morning, we are at the end of the line. “In these final days, [God] has spoken to us through His Son,”¹⁷ just as He spoke His healing words to the 10 lepers in Luke. On Sunday, we begin a new church year. And we will look forward again to the coming of our Savior in the flesh. May we all be so blessed as the Samaritan leper, the double outcast, to know that only Christ in the flesh can make us well.

[*Raise people*].

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ + Jesus. Amen.

¹³ LSB 332, stanza 6.

¹⁴ Deut 8:3

¹⁵ Luke 17:19

¹⁶ Deut 8:3

¹⁷ Hebrews 1:2