

Trinity 14

Lk. 17:11-19 (ESV)

“And as [Jesus] entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’”

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Intro: Blessings to all of you, dear ones. I pray that you're well and that you've had a restful weekend up to this point. I've prepared a relatively brief homily for you today, but it's one that I hope you'll still find rich and satisfying nonetheless.

I. I want to start by pointing out what I think are two overarching dangers that are easy to fall into when interpreting the Holy Scriptures--there are, of course, many dangers and pitfalls to avoid, but for our purposes today, I just want to highlight two in particular and explain why I think we sometimes have difficulty appreciating the depth and sweetness of certain texts like that of our Gospel lesson--like that of Jesus healing the 10 lepers.

a. The first danger is one I'm sure you'll recognize right away: it's explaining the meaning and significance of a biblical text simply in terms of its immediate cultural setting but failing to grasp the deeper and more profound and ultimate theological reality being revealed right before our eyes.

i. I'll give you an example: in the Gospel according to the evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when the Lord Jesus is described as eating meals with tax collectors and sinners, it's all too easy for people to think Christ is simply interested in challenging social norms in a highly visible and provocative way and that He's mainly standing up to the arrogance and hypocrisy of the pharisees. Now while there's some merit to that, it misses the theological reality that Christ eating with tax collectors and sinners means that He's reconciled them to Himself and, thus, to God the Father; Jesus eating and drinking with sinners is Him showing them and bringing them into the very hospitality of God, and His eating and drinking with them presents us with a potent, loaded theological image of the forgiveness of sins. That's why I say, very often the theological significance of the Holy Scriptures is easy to miss if we focus too much on what's going on culturally.

ii. But by the same token, we also miss out on the deep richness of a text if we don't appreciate the cultural dynamics at play well enough. And this is the second danger I want to highlight. It's one that I think causes many of us living in a Western individualist culture to misunderstand just how significant the things happening in our Gospel lesson for today really are--things that people in an Eastern, more communal and collectivist culture would hear differently than we do. It's not anyone's fault; it's just how things are. And I submit to you that we do ourselves a disservice if we don't at least try to understand the events taking place in the Bible on their own terms. So what all really is going on with Jesus cleansing the 10 lepers? Clearly, Christ heals them and shows His divine power, but what deeper mysteries lay before us in this text? What priceless treasures are there for us to lay hold of?

II. Well, in the first place, we need to see that in and of themselves, the poor lepers standing off at a distance calling out to Jesus saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"--these lepers up to that point had been consigned to a kind of living death because of their leprosy. One might even say, in the true sense of the term, that it was a kind of living hell.

a. This is because generally in Eastern cultures, being a member of a particular community is life. Your community and its values define your identity; they govern everything you say and do and even how you interact not just with your own people but with others too. If someone from an Eastern culture really wanted to get to know you, dear ones, they wouldn't start by asking you about your favorite movie or where you'd go on your dream vacation. They'd likely start by asking who your mother and father are. They'd ask what village you come from and what god you worship in that place. For some of you, they might just ask whether you come from the tribe of the Jayhawks or the Wildcats and that would tell them everything. But this is how they think.

b. So for the lepers to have to be removed from their village lest the disease spread, for the lepers to be cut off from among their people and their communal life together there, it meant death. It meant a loss of their very identity. It meant living among the lost and forsaken--those who had also died as members of their communities in much the same way as someone's hand being cut off from their body has no life in it.

c. I can think of no better way to illustrate this to you than by sharing with you a story I had the pleasure of hearing from one of my friends in seminary who had lived and worked in a certain village over in Africa for some years. There was a woman who, because of some terrible thing, had brought shame to her family--so much so that they forcibly removed her from their village and she had to live alone way off in the distance next to where the village chicken coop was. She was no longer a member of that community and there was much weeping and gnashing of teeth from her out there as she grieved every night. My friend asked one of the villagers one day what was going on with her. The lady said, "She is dead...She's not one of us anymore."

d. One day, the woman out by the chicken coop came down with an illness, and it looked as if she was going to die. So my friend and a doctor that had been brought in from outside the village went in to see her. And my friend asked her, "What is it that you want the most." And she said, "I just want to see the face of my mother and my father again." But maybe you can see what exactly this would mean for that to happen; her parents couldn't do that and be with their forsaken daughter unless they also wanted to lose their honor and life and identity as members of their village. They would have to share and make themselves participants in her shame and forsakenness, in her living death. Her father would not, but I'm completely amazed to say her mother did.

III. Needless to say, then, returning to the events in our Gospel text, now you may well have a better grasp of what's going on with these lepers standing far off begging Jesus to have mercy on them. They were looking to Jesus for salvation. Better yet, they saw Him as their salvation. And the text says Jesus, seeing them--meaning He looked on them and they saw His face--He said,

"Go, and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were healed. You know what this means: after the sacrifice prescribed by Moses had been offered and the lepers pronounced clean by the priests, they could return to their families, their villages, their friends, maybe even their children. This is tantamount to these men being received back from the dead. These cleansed lepers were so overcome with joy, so utterly overtaken with gladness that nine of them don't bother returning to Jesus to give thanks. But one of them does--a Samaritan of all people!--one that the Jews all considered to be unclean, a Gentile! This Samaritan returns giving thanks to the God of Israel Who had done this astonishing thing, and I for one am convinced Jesus says "where are the nine" while the 9 Jewish lepers who'd been cleansed were still within earshot. I think Jesus is gently calling them to join this Samaritan in giving thanks, as is only right. But in any case, Jesus proceeds to point out exactly what it was that had saved this Samaritan man-- it was his faith. For it is by faith that we lay hold of Jesus; by faith, we're united with Him as one and a beautiful exchange takes place: we are restored and His holiness and purity are now ours.

IV. And all our sins and iniquities become His--things that make us blemished and leprous in the sight of God and which would cause us to be forever banished from His presence and cut off from His holy people. Christ our Lord stepped took our sins and our shame and our forsakenness upon Himself and bore them in His body on the cross to save us. What words are grand enough, lofty enough, dear ones, to praise the otherworldly mercy our Savior has shown us?--for Him cleansing us through Holy Baptism and bringing us into the community of the redeemed, making us members of His body, which is the Holy Christian church--the place of salvation where we've been adopted into the family of God. Look around and behold your true brothers and sisters you've been given in the Lord Jesus with the Holy Church as our mother and God Himself as our Father. So come present yourself before our blessed Savior and give thanks like the Samaritan, both today and everyday. And know that by faith in Jesus—the incarnate Salvation of God—we together with all the company of the redeemed shall see the face of God in the land of the living--unblemished, resurrected, full of gladness, and free.

To Christ be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.