

Sermon for October 9, 2016 – “Unclean”

28th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Luke 17:11-19

Today, I want to tell you a story from the gospel of Luke. It's the story of the Ten Lepers. And I'd like to tell it from the perspective of one of the disciples. I would hope that we will allow the story to speak to us as it must have spoken to those who were there when it happened, those who were following Jesus to learn the way of life.

We were heading with Jesus to Jerusalem. We'd taken the old border road that ran between Samaria and Galilee, and it was a hot day. It was the kind of day when the dust of the road lies thick on the bushes and puffs up around your feet with every step you take. The kind of day when the sweat runs down into your eyes and turns the grime on your face into streaks of mud. For a while, the only sound that any of us heard, was the low drone and buzz of the insects as we walked. But then through the still of that day, at first in the distance, then closer and closer, we heard them. “Unclean, unclean.” We began to look around. Finally, as we rounded the crest of a hill to begin the long walk down to the village in the valley below we saw them. They were standing off the road a bit and as we walked towards them the cry “unclean, unclean” stopped. There were ten of them. And, even if we hadn't heard their cry we would've had no problem knowing who and what they were. Some of them had rags wrapped around their hands, others had their feet bundled up in strips of old cloth. All of them were dressed in the tattered and torn clothing that people in their condition were required to wear and all of them had, as they were supposed to, long unkempt hair. There was no mistaking what they were. They were lepers. And, at the sight of them standing just off the path staring at us like hungry and wounded animals, we stopped. None of us wanted to get any closer to those wretched creatures...Could you blame us? I mean everyone knows about leprosy don't they? It's simply awful. No one recovers from it. It slowly rots and destroys the body. And, worse yet, it's so easy to catch. That's why the priests insist that everyone who has a skin blemish report to them for an examination. The priest looks at them, and if they have raw patches of flesh, or if they have white bumps or red marks on their skin, or if their hair is discolored, the priest pronounces them unclean. The person must then go into isolation for seven days so no one else is put in danger.

It must be very difficult for those people wondering for an entire week if they have leprosy. Wondering if they're ever going to be able to live with their families again. It doesn't seem fair but in many respects it is. I mean, it's fair for the rest of us, certainly, fair for their families because leprosy is terrible...So very, very terrible. The good news is that most times the person doesn't have leprosy. They go back to the priest after seven days, their blemish is healed over and they're pronounced clean and allowed to return to their homes. For others...Well, for those like the ten we saw that day, their blemishes worsen, the color of their sores becomes brighter or more of their flesh is infected...And they're banished. They are declared forever unclean, forever unable to have normal human contact, unable to bounce their children on their knees, unable to hug their wives or husbands. Unable to do anything that might cause someone else to catch their disease.

Imagine if you can, living out the rest of your life in a hovel. Imagine having to live in a camp and spend all your time with those who are suffering and diseased like you. It just so hard to think about, not being able to see anyone you love except at a distance, only being able to talk to them by yelling from far off. After a while everyone you know would stop coming to see you. No one would want to look at you. No one would want to have anything to do with you. No one, despite their claim that they love you, will ever hug you, or touch you again. No one, that is, except those who are like you. Those whose bodies are twisted, shortened, and rotting.

Imagine too, waiting to see what will happen to you. Waiting to see if your disease will spread as it has in others. Taking from you your fingers, your toes. Destroying your mouth and nose till at last you starve to death or die from some infection. But, not until you've lingered for several years. Imagine it – waiting and hoping, hoping against hope for that one in a million chance that your sores will clear up. That you'll be able to go to the priest and hear him say the word "clean." But then you go and he doesn't. You hear the word "unclean." You cannot go back to your family. You have to be isolated for that is what the Law says. Imagine what that must be like. Imagine having to go around dressed in little more than rags. Imagine never being allowed to cut or comb your hair. Imagine having to cry out "unclean, unclean" whenever you come near someone. That's what leprosy is all about. No one in their right mind would want to come near it. That's why we stopped on the road when we saw the lepers that day. We, the other disciples and I, were being cautious. As cautious as any sensible person would be near lepers. We stopped and we wondered what Jesus would do. Oddly, Jesus didn't seem afraid of the lepers. I remember another time we came upon a leper; he begged Jesus to heal him. He said, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Then Jesus reached out his hand and he actually touched him. He said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the man was healed – the leprosy was gone! It was quite the event. And, I figure that the ten lepers we met that day must've heard about it because as we started again to work our way down to the village, they spotted the teacher. They began to call out to him: "Jesus, Master, have pity on us." When Jesus heard this he stopped and, as the sun beat down on our heads, Jesus turned towards them. Holding out his hands, He said: "Go, show yourselves to the priests." The ten lepers must've wondered what Jesus meant, they must've wondered because the chance of being healed of leprosy is so rare. They must've wondered, but they must've hoped as well. They must've believed that Jesus had done something for them, that their one in a million chance for a normal life had happened. Because all of them turned and started down the road ahead of us into the village. As we watched them go, the dust rising from their tracks as they hurried ahead of us, we began to realize that Jesus had healed them. Why else would he have told them to "go show yourselves to the priests?" We knew that anyone who's healed of a skin disease is required to be pronounced clean by a priest and we marveled that Jesus with just a word could heal those men. We found out just a few minutes later that it was so.

We were told that it happened as they went down the hill towards the village. We learned that their sores began to dry up, and their blemishes started to disappear. With every step they took towards their old homes they felt stronger, younger, more energetic, and when they'd rounded the final turn on the way to the village they were completely healed. It must've been an incredible thing for them. Think about it, all their years of suffering, all hope gone, and then, all of sudden at the word of a complete stranger their loneliness, their pain, their banishment began to evaporate. With every step it must've become more and more apparent that they could once again play with their children. They could again hold their wives in their arms. They could work side by side once more with their friends and family. Indeed, it must have been an incredible moment for them, it certainly was for us! And then, something strange happened. We saw one of the lepers again, it must've been about fifteen minutes later. The others had disappeared down the road to the village but one came back. We could tell something had happened to him while he was still fairly far off. The shuffling, cautious walk of the leper was gone. He was striding rapidly up the hill towards us and he was singing and laughing and saying over and over again: Hallelujah! We could soon see that he was completely cured! His skin, what we could see of it through his tattered clothing, was pink and healthy. When he got close to us he singled out Jesus, and still singing and saying "hallelujah", he ran to Jesus. He threw himself down at his feet and thanked Him over and over again. Jesus drew him to his feet and hugged him.

Until finally, looking at us he asked: “Were not ten made clean?” “Where are the other nine? “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

At first we didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about, but then we noticed that the man at Jesus’ feet had the accent of a Samaritan. A Samaritan! Those people, the ones who despise us, the ones who refuse to worship in the right way and sacrifice to God at the temple. And as we pondering Jesus’ question, He looked down at the Samaritan and said to him: “Rise and go, your faith has made you well.” And the man got up and went his way still singing and praising God. We stood there a minute thinking about what Jesus had said, that the man’s faith had made him well. We wondered if Jesus was angry at the other lepers. Angry for not coming back and thanking Him, and God, for giving them their lives back. We wondered if Jesus was trying to tell us something about Himself, or about Samaritans. “Your faith has made you well.” It was a strange thing to say. But, one thing was certain, all ten men had been cured of leprosy. Jesus had said so. But, it seemed to me that something **else** happened to the Samaritan. Something **more**, something **special**. He was not only cured he was made **whole**! The others there that day also thought the same thing. We talked among ourselves about it over the years. We wondered if Jesus was trying to tell us that there **is** something special about giving thanks. We wondered what we’d have done if we’d been one of those ten lepers. Would we’ve come back to thank Jesus – heaven help us – like the Samaritan? Or would we’ve been so happy about being cured that like the other nine we’d rush through the formalities with the priests and hurry back to our homes and our normal lives.

We asked ourselves and each other if we’d ever **really** thanked God for what we have or if we’d done all our lives what so many do. If we’d simply gone to the priests and the temple on the Sabbath and the times prescribed by the Law and made the usual offerings, and said the prayers we’re taught to pray and then returned home to live as we always have. As if nothing had really changed. What would we do? We wondered. Were we like the nine lepers who were cured? Or were we like the one who came back? The one who was not **cured** – but made **whole**? What about all of you?

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.