

“Reception Complete?”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 17:11-19

I don’t know about you, but every time I hear about the ten lepers Jesus met on his way to Jerusalem, I get this image in my mind of horribly disfigured people, forever severed from family and friends, but that wasn’t really the case. The word translated from Hebrew into the English as “leprosy” actually refers to a whole cluster of skin ailments, most of which healed on their own pretty quickly.

Leviticus defined leprosy vaguely as flaky or discolored patches of skin. Biblical lepers probably suffered from psoriasis or eczema, and their exile was less about protecting others from illness than from insulating the community from impurity. Such impurity was thought to reflect an otherwise hidden sin.

This may be more than you ever wanted to know about leprosy and its role in the Bible. But without this information, we could easily misunderstand what happened that day, when Jesus entered a village between Galilee and Samaria, where ten lepers approached him.

Notice that they aren’t out in the middle of nowhere, dragging along like something out of “The Walking Dead.” Jesus had already entered the village when the lepers approached him, and they were, too, taking care to keep the necessary distance to prevent their impurity from defiling others. Though they kept their distance from Jesus, the lepers were close enough for him to hear, and they called out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

They asked for mercy; not healing, for mercy. Certainly, in the circumstances, we might think the mercy they wanted was healing, but remember that most of these skin ailments cleared up on their own. The standard “quarantine” period was about two weeks, and once a person’s condition disappeared, they were ritually reincorporated into the community. No, these people wanted mercy, because Jesus was revered as a prophet, perhaps even something more, and these people wanted mercy from Jesus because they were sinners. That’s why their skin was mottled.

According to Leviticus, it’s the sin within that sort of bubbles up and causes the skin problem, and if the mercy a sick person would want is healing, what would a sinner want? Forgiveness. And they must have wanted it badly, badly enough to take a chance on Jesus. They may have heard some stories, but likely didn’t know much about Jesus or how he might react to their plea.

The safe play was to keep quiet, try not to be noticed and let things run their course. That’s how we like it. Hide those sins, and if any symptoms bubble up, cover them, and if you can’t cover them, disappear. Just fade back into the shadows where no one will notice; a little self-imposed exile. And we play this game not only with each other, but with God. But not these lepers in the Gospel of Luke: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Those lepers must have wanted the mercy of forgiveness badly enough they didn’t care about consequences.

And what did Jesus do? He saw them. Unlike so many, who probably turned their heads and ignored them, Jesus saw them and said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And they went, which is sort of surprising. Remember they walked away with their skin still the same. Luke tells us that “as they went, they were made clean.” At the

point of departure, they had no evidence of change. They were healed as they went, and aren't we all? The priest couldn't heal them. The priest could only certify that the leprosy had passed. So going to a priest while you still had leprosy was not only futile, but could cause problems, because you could defile the priest, and then your problem became everybody's problem.

And what did Jesus say about this? "Your faith has made you well." But notice that Jesus uttered these words to only one of the ten lepers. Only one out of ten, after receiving an extraordinary gift of grace, thought to return thanks. And that one person was a Samaritan.

To say that Samaritans and Jews didn't get along very well back then would be a polite understatement. There was a lot of bad blood between them. They worshipped differently, interpreted scripture differently, and shamed one another for being different. That is why the parable of The Good Samaritan is so powerful. A rabbi making a hero out of a Samaritan would have been extremely offensive to most Jews.

Out of the ten, only one returned, and he was a Samaritan, and it was to him that the Jewish rabbi Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well." It was faith in Jesus, yes, that empowered all ten lepers to go see the priest, despite the fact that healing hadn't happened yet, but somehow the Samaritan's faith was sufficiently strong that he could see beyond his skin, bringing him back to say thanks. The nine saw their lives restored, but just the one received complete renewal. Among the ten, only he heard Jesus say, "Your faith has made you well." The rest had gone back to their ordinary, daily lives, but for the Samaritan, a deeper change took place, making his life extraordinary.

What do we learn from this about how God gives and how we receive? Well, first we learn that Jesus responds when we call, but that it often takes courage, because we, like those lepers, call upon Jesus as sinners. Not as teachers or priests or entrepreneurs or retirees; not as the healthy and strong, the weak and sick, the rich or poor; we call upon Jesus, first and foremost, as sinners. And that's something hard to admit, even to ourselves, much less others. Yet your presence here does just that, because this is a hospital for sinners, not club for the righteous.

To receive the gift, we need to call upon Jesus, and when Jesus responds – which he often does in quite surprising ways – it's up to us whether or not we take him at his word. The blessing Jesus has for us may differ from the blessing we want, and sometimes the instructions we're given don't make much sense, like lepers being told to go find a priest, before their skin had cleared.

To get the gift God has for us, though, we need to place ourselves in a position where we can receive it, and the primary position for receiving the gifts of God is faith – a faith willing to try something new and unexpected from time to time, just because you never know for sure what could happen.

But to fully receive the gift takes a little more. It takes the humility and the awareness the Samaritan showed. The other nine were healed, restored, and forgiven, but only one ever knew why. Only one found out how. “Your faith has made you well.” No doubt, the nine felt elated, eager to return home to their normal lives, and I can't fault them for that. But they never really got it. They never got the whole package of God's gift, because for whatever reason, it didn't occur to them to return and give praise and show gratitude to Jesus.

How often do we take it for granted that we've already gotten all there is to get, unaware of how much more there is to receive if only we give thanks? When we give thanks, a spiritual reality breaks through to shed light on how it's all happening. "Your faith has made you well." What a tremendous insight! And that's part of the reason why we sinners gather here, to share in praise and thanksgiving for the gifts we've received, out of authentic joy, with no ulterior motive, aware that the result of our thanksgiving is the completion of the gift.

When we make the completion, to borrow a phrase from football, we fully receive what God offers us, and our lives move forward in ways we didn't know existed, a life we thought not possible, where God's reign of abundance overwhelms the fear of scarcity, where mercy undermines the fear that inspires cruelty and hate, directed not only toward others, but often inflicted inwardly as self-loathing.

All it takes is faith. We need to summon the humility to shout out as sinners to Jesus. We need to take him at his word and go where he sends, even if it doesn't make sense. We need the awareness to return and give thanks. But the little secret, so frequently forgotten; the great mystery of it all is that each of the attitudes we need – humility; faithfulness; awareness; gratitude – are themselves gifts freely given by God, if only we are ready to receive. Amen.