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C.S. Lewis provides an interesting commentary on this morning's Gospel in his book The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. In the book, Edmund, Lucy, and their crew sail through the Narnian world. They are joined on their journey by their spoiled, selfish, and defiant cousin, Eustace. On one of the islands they land on, Eustace finds a dragon's lair, and greedy for the treasure, he puts on a gold bracelet and falls asleep. Upon waking he realizes he has been turned into a dragon. Lewis writes, "*Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself.*" Eustace, as is typical of a little boy, was at first thrilled to be a fierce, fire-breathing dragon, and the biggest thing around. It was fun until he learned that this transformation cut him off from his friends, and all of humanity, with only the weight of loneliness and desperation for friends.

Eustace becomes an outcast, and even though he is a work of fiction, the experience he describes is very similar to the life of a leper in Jesus' Day. There seems to have been two minds about leprosy in ancient times, the first is that leprosy was an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual disorder and sin. It was unfairly believed that leprosy was divine punishment for some hidden and secret sin. The second was more realistic, that leprosy was highly contagious, thus lepers were rejected from their towns, communities, homes, and families. They were condemned to live as beggars in the wilderness and outskirt places, leading a very lonely and desperate life.

At least we may assume that the lepers we read about in this morning's Gospel have some kind of leprous community. Ten lepers come to Jesus begging to be healed. Later we learn, almost in passing, that one was a Samaritan, and the rest were Jews. We learned last week that the Samaritans are the descendants of the Jews and their Gentile neighbors. The Samaritans were not taken away into captivity in Babylon as the Jews were, and they even had their own temple, their own version of the scriptures, and their own priests. The Jews and Samaritans were notorious for hating each other. The Samaritans saw in the Jews an entire nation of people who looked down on them, while the Jews saw in the Samaritans a separate, disobedient, and heretical denomination. They were disobedient because they had trespassed God's command and married into the neighboring gentile tribes. They were disobedient because they did not share the same scriptures, Law, Ten Commandments, Temple, and priests. The Samaritans' religion was viewed as a perversion of the Jewish religion and its right worship of God. Remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan,

they would rather walk all the way around Samaria rather than take the shorter route through Samaria to get from Jericho to Jerusalem.

According to the Jews, today's Samaritan leper should be the outcast of the outcasts. Yet despite this, as George MacDonald writes, *their bond was a common suffering; it must be changed to a common faith in the healer of it*. They were united in their leprosy. This shared reality outweighed whatever religious, societal, or political differences which under normal circumstances might have concerned them. Likewise, they were united in faith, they came to Jesus begging Him that He would heal them. They listened obediently to Him when He said to go and show themselves to the priests. They went their on their way obediently. But only one leper was of such great faith, as George MacDonald comments, *his obedience was infinite*, and that leper was the Samaritan leper, the only one to stop and thank Jesus. This brings up an important question, what does infinite obedience look like? A Pharisee witnessing this miracle would have thought that the nine lepers had been infinitely obedient. They were following Jesus' command to the very letter and obeying the Law of Moses to go and be inspected by the priests and then to offer a thank offering on the altar. Yet, Jesus teaches us that infinite obedience is not just this, but that true and lively faith and real obedience are marked by the overflow of gratitude. What would be even more remarkable to a Pharisee, is that of all people, it was the Samaritan leper, whom they assumed to be disobedient, who was in Jesus' opinion, infinitely obedient to God.

Returning to the story of Eustace from Narnia, he likewise had to practice obedience to Aslan, the figure for God in the Narnia stories. Aslan leads him to a pool of clear water and tells him there that he must take off his scales. Eustace is obedient and tries with all his might to take off his scales, only to find that no matter how many layers of scales he manages to take off he is still a dragon underneath. It is only when he allows Aslan to take off the scales that he is finally able to be freed and turned back into a boy. Eustace had learned his lesson and from that time on began to be more obedient and grateful. We wonder how grateful he would have been if he had been able to free himself, or if he would have been, rather, like those nine lepers from the Gospel.

But, of course, the story of Eustace is an allegory, as all of Narnia is an allegory for the lessons and truths of the Scriptures. The story of the transformation of Eustace lends itself to Baptism and repentance just as well as it does to the healings of the lepers. Likewise, the healing of the lepers is a sign and allegory to us of Baptism and repentance. We are taught that we were spiritual lepers, begging to be healed by Jesus Christ before we were

brought to the baptismal font or entered the confessional. We entered the waters of forgiveness out of obedience, and we were healed. But the one thing that will set us apart, and provide us with a deeper healing, is gratitude and thanksgiving. For in gratitude and thanksgiving is found the true essence of faith, obedience, the mark of true and lasting spiritual healing. Amen.