

**The Episcopal Church in the Pemi-Baker Valley**  
**Proper 23 C**                      **October 9, 2016**

Today's gospel account of the foreign leper who discovers that he has been healed is foremost a story about boundaries and the welcome of the outsider. Jesus, we are told is on his way towards Jerusalem and Holy Week. He is, of course, traveling from a place of acceptance to the capital, where he, himself will be found unacceptable.

Jesus is on the road. Significantly, Luke describes the place where they were as "*the region between Samaria and Galilee.*" And I think he does so with intention; because Luke sees in this healing encounter the breaking down of the boundaries we construct as human societies. Jesus was *in the region between Samaria and Galilee.* Samaria was a place of rejection, the land of a people who rejected the Judaism of Jerusalem - and who also rejected Jesus. Galilee was the starting point of Jesus' public ministry, the place where the followers of Jesus were gathered and nurtured, whereas Samaria was the place where one community had already refused Jesus entry, and where his Galilean disciples sought to bring down fire on the enemy. Galileans, like any good Jews of their time, could not have comprehended the concept of a "*Good Samaritan.*" That was impossible. The notion of a good Samaritan would be akin to saying today that someone was good soldier of the Islamic State.

Somewhere in the unmarked boundary between these two rival peoples, Jesus comes to the outskirts of an unnamed village, where ten lepers were. These lepers dwelt on the periphery of the village, outside of acceptable life. Out of fear of contagion and also because of the religious stigma of impurity, the Jews, like other Middle Eastern societies, mandated that these stricken ones remain isolated from townspeople; they must live outside the borders of community. It was not only health concerns that have consigned them to this place of isolation. Their condition was viewed as divine punishment, and ritual laws of their religion mandated their expulsion from society. So just as in the parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, the ostracized ones were relegated to remaining outside of normal contact and out of sight. "The easiest way to put people out of mind is to place them out of sight." [Roger Van Harn]

Today's gospel is really a two-part story. The beginning is the account of another miraculous healing, this time of lepers, while the second half ultimate focuses on the salvation of the outsider. But to begin with, this is a story about lepers, who despite their individual nationality, were all considered outsiders. When anyone approached these marginalized, isolated ones, Jewish Levitical law mandated that the ostracized announce their uncleanness, calling out from afar, "*Leper, Leper,*" as a way of maintaining the separation between the outcast and the pure. But this day their cry may also have been a plea to the itinerant rabbi, whom they address as "*Master.*" Theirs was not a warning, but a plea for mercy and healing.

Interestingly, Jesus does not cross over to come nearer to them, but instead simply tells them to go and present themselves to the priests. Unlike almost every other healing recorded in the New Testament, Jesus effects their cleansing from afar. [And, of course, at the end of the story, the thankful-one came close to Jesus, reversing the divide between healthy and afflicted and also closing the spatial gap between Jew and Samaritan.]

Luke says Jesus “saw them,” and that is significant. His contemporaries would have only seen rightful recipients of their pain. For it was commonly believed that such illness was the result of sin [recall the story of Job], and so they must have deserved to itch and burn as part of God’s punishment. But Jesus sees them as they are - and he also sees how they can be.

In all likelihood Jesus knew that they would not personally thank him for curing them. To this point in Luke’s gospel, no one is recorded as having thanked him. But Jesus sends them off nevertheless. He simply says, “*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*” Jesus knew the Book of Leviticus, and according to Hebrew Law, in Jewish society, it was only a priest who could certify someone as “clean” and acceptable to return to community life. One of the roles of the Jewish priest was that of purity inspector. If a skin disorder should go away, only a priest could authenticate one’s cleansing. Priests, in this way, acted like TSA agents at the airport, inspecting persons and their baggage before entrance to everyday society was permitted.

Following Jesus’ instructions, the ten go on their way, when all suddenly discover themselves cured, free from the condition that has made them outcasts. Now we should perhaps take note that it is only as they walk that they discover what God has done for them. First, they must act before there is any evidence of healing. The ten needed first to go as Jesus commanded, and in a way then, they were partnering with God in their own healing. Sometimes, as our congregations are discovering, we have to walk in faith, in trust, in hope, before we can discover where that faith will lead.

For its first hearers, this gospel story had a surprise ending. When the ten discover that they are healed, only one returns to Jesus, falling on his face, shouting his praise of God and giving his thanks to this man of God. And, of course, he was the one doubly shunned, being a leper and a foreigner. Jesus asks, perhaps playfully, *Weren’t there ten? What happened to the others? Where are they?* I don’t think that Jesus was scolding the other nine. If you think about it, they simply did exactly what Jesus told them to do. Obedience guided their footsteps, and they were taking the very road they were commanded, headed for readmission into the community. But obedience by itself is not a sufficient response to the saving power of God. Now healed, they obviously had no difficulty recognizing the change in their lives, but apparently they missed the realization of where that gift came from. As someone has said, “Like Forrest Gump with a football, they crossed the goal line but went right on running, clear out of the stadium, where the celebration happened without them.” (Paul Duke)

Twice in this short gospel, we hear the word “saw.” Jesus “saw them, and he said to them, “*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*” That line always causes me to ask, what am I seeing, and what, or who, am I failing to see? Sometimes people in need are right there in front of us, but do we really see them? Maybe it’s the international student at the college or the prep school, who at the holidays will be alone and far from home and family. Or perhaps it’s a person who is right around us, whose daily life is a struggle for subsistence or emotional stability. What do you see around you? And whose need is invisible to you? And if you see, what do you do? Someone once said, “The important question to ask is not, ‘What do you believe?’ but what difference does it make that you believe?” [Brian Stroffregen]

As they walked, all ten lepers saw that they were changed? Somewhere between Jesus and the certifying priest, they saw that they were cleansed. Were the other nine grateful? Why did they not return to give thanks? Gratitude may be the strongest indicator of one's character. And the absence of gratitude can reveal a self-centeredness or an attitude that only concludes that we deserve more than we ever get, so we don't need to be grateful. Perhaps, in some sense they had faith when they obey Jesus' instruction to go to the priest. But that faith was incomplete without some acknowledgement of the true giver of all life.

One, only one however, followed his heart instead of his mind. And his was a two-part response. First, he did not obey Jesus' call to go to the priest, but instead came back in joyful thanksgiving, negating the spatial gap between those outside and those within, between foreigner and countryman, between the sick and the well. And secondly, he fell at the feet of Jesus, giving thanks for the healing he had received. And to him, Jesus says "*your faith has made you well.*"

I think that statement may be a bit confusing to some, because there wasn't a great deal of faith evidenced on the part of any of the lepers. And it was Jesus or perhaps God's compassion, not their faith that affected their cure. So what does it mean to say that your faith has made you well? If someone today is praying for healing and does not receive it, does that mean his or her faith was somehow lacking? Obviously not. Another possible translation of that line would read "*your faith has brought you salvation.*" In other words, in your walking as you were commanded before there was any evidence of healing, you discovered that God had healed you. But later as you walked back in thanksgiving, in an awareness of all that God has done for you, you have now found new wholeness, salvation.

There are some forty-one gospel accounts of healing by this man Jesus, the one whom we call our *Savior*. In Greek, the word *savior* is synonymous with "*healer.*" And (as Marcus Borg has said) "in the Bible, salvation is mostly concerned with something that happens in this life," not the life to come. "Even in the New Testament, the primary meaning of the word '*salvation*' is transformation in this life." Our word '*salvation*' actually comes from the English word, '*salve,*' a healing ointment. And God's work of salvation has to do with healing, binding up the wounded, restoring the lost, reuniting with the outsider, giving new life to the grieving, restoring those who have been battered and wounded by life to become the persons they were created to be.

And faith, as I often try to say, is not so much about accepting certain beliefs, but rather it's about walking in trust, walking before the healing has occurred, walking in hope of wholeness before our wholeness has come. For salvation is not just about some life after this life, but rather about our coming back time and again to this person named Jesus and saying "Thank you. Thank you for you are the giver of real life, the bestower of thankful living." And when we walk with that thankful mindset, we can, I believe, find wholeness, salvation, the salve of this life.

Thinking of our thankful mindset, let me close with a benediction from Teresa of Avila, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic and Roman Catholic Saint:

"May today there be peace within.

May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.  
May you be content knowing you are a child of God.  
Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise  
and love.  
(For) it is there for each and every one of us.”

Amen.