

St Thomas Church
Trinity XIV
Luke XVII: 11
September 22, 2019
rmcneely+

“. . . but where are the nine?”

It is easy to hear today's Gospel
and come away from it
wagging our fingers at the ungrateful nine lepers
and remarking
that here is another occasion where Jesus is raising the
subject of prejudice against the Samaritans.

No one would argue with us,
but if we left it there,
we would miss something quite important.

What appears on the surface
as a story about Jesus curing ten lepers;
can reveal a good deal more,
if you let yourself deeper into the story.

The Gospel for today is presented only by St Luke and he
chose it carefully. It is certainly an account of one of Our
Lord's healings

but it is a story
with all the qualities of a parable.

It is the only story like it in the New Testament. You might
think of it as an enacted parable.

Let me try to unlock it for us.

The story takes place in an unnamed village as Jesus was making His way to Jerusalem. He is in the northern border region between Samaria and Galilee, not long before the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

In Hebrew society, people with leprosy could have no contact with healthy people for fear of spreading the dread disease. They were required to ring a bell and announce “unclean, unclean” whenever they encountered people without the disease.

They were required to live apart
separated from everyone else
in small leper colonies

While leprosy was and is a serious disease,
(18 million cases (mostly in India)
in order to penetrate the surface of the story,
we must think of the lepers as people
who are very much like people of today
who have distanced themselves from God.

Perhaps their sin has become a wall separating them from God.

Like lepers of 2000 years ago,
when we sin
we tend to isolate ourselves from others.

Left alone,
we withdraw.

Perhaps because of shame
or embarrassment,
we pull away from friends
and family.

We tend,
 like the lepers,
 to be among other people with the same spiritual disease.
 And like the lepers in the story,
 we are separated from the village,
 completely ostracized and isolated.

So think of the lepers in the story as people with a spiritual disorder who have separated themselves from God. If we gave the spiritual disorder a name like leprosy, we might call it “separosy”.

So the 10 lepers
 immediately recognize Jesus
 as a compassionate miracle worker
 and they call out to Him to alleviate their suffering
 as he approached the village.
 “Jesus, Master, Have mercy on us” they shout.

His response is immediate but not exactly what anyone might have expected.

In a literal sense,

 He did not cure their disease
 and did not heal them.

 He did not put His hands on them or speak a cure
 As was more common for Him.

Instead, He told them to show themselves to the priests
 ... to the church.

The priests represent the Church in this enacted parable.

Go to church was His instruction.

The Church is the cure for “separosy”.

It is in prayer
and in worship
and in the sacraments
that we are restored to God.

The ten obeyed His command.
Without comment,
without question
and without objection, they obeyed.

On their way to the church, they realize they were cleansed.
Notice Luke does not tell us they were healed.

They were cleansed.
Jesus cleansed them of their sin,
of their separation from God.

In baptism
our sins are washed away
and we are restored to life with God.
When we receive Communion
our sinful bodies are made clean by His body
and our souls washed through His most precious
blood.

The ten lepers were cleansed
and so could return to the temple to worship,
could return to God,
could return to humanity
just as we are cleansed and restored to God in the
sacraments.

In the Church and in the sacraments we are delivered from evil and opened again to the influence and reception of heavenly grace and charity.

One of the lepers turns back falls to Jesus' feet and glorifies God with a loud voice. And he is a Samaritan. The parable is another reminder that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God of all mankind.

In a society fractured by bias and racial prejudice
Jesus broke down the walls of separation :

There is no race of mankind
No gender
No Country of origin
No demographic
No state of mind
Not even the most sinful behavior
That is beyond the reach of our Lord
Or beyond the care of His Church
Beyond St Thomas' Church

Then Jesus asks the questions that make this enacted parable stand out:

Were there not 10 cleansed? Where are the nine?

Is Jesus criticizing the ungrateful 9?
Making some comment of social etiquette about please and thank you?
Perhaps.

But if we think of the story as an enacted parable, there may be a deeper and richer message.

Jesus was approaching the crucifixion
and He used this long walk from Galilee
to the Mediterranean Sea
and back to Jerusalem
to teach the Apostles what they would need to know
after the Ascension.

After He was not to be with them in body.

Was Jesus using the occasion of the ten lepers to teach the Apostles and to teach us the unending and overwhelming nature of God's forgiveness?

“**Were there not 10**” is to point out that the entire group of men had sought His mercy and the entire group of men had been cleansed of their sins.

The 10 men represent all mankind in the parable. It was a revolutionary concept 2000 years ago,
and Jesus is reinforcing the fact
that if they truly repent
and seek forgiveness,
all mankind will be forgiven.

Even the ugly putrid sores of the leper were cleansed and
so the ugly sores and wounds of our souls can be cleansed.

“**. . . but what of the nine?**”

Jesus asks a rhetorical question. He knows the answer to the factual question.

He is directing the Apostles
 and He is directing us
 to the 9 who were cleansed
 and who were given a new start in life,
 but who failed to return to God.
 He directs the Apostles to the 9 and asks “what will
 become of them?”.

What are the Apostles to do,
 what are we to do
 for those who have been part of a miracle
 but who can't see the hand of God in it
 and can't take the Hand of God and return to Him?
 They remind me of the man who got lost for days in the
 high Sierra.
 He was describing his ordeal and his desperation and fear.
 And he said that in the end he even knelt down on the
 ground and prayed to God to be saved from starvation.
 Someone asked him if his prayers were answered and he
 said “Oh no. Before God could answer my prayer a ranger
 happened along by chance and led me to safety”.

Sometimes we have our hands full just trying to point out
 the obvious. But they are our charge.
 The parable concludes with the Samaritan at Jesus' feet
 praising God.
 Jesus tells him what all of us long to hear Him say: “**Arise.
 Go thy way. Thy faith hath made thee whole.**”
 the Samaritan had been cleansed/forgiven
 and had returned to God in Christ
 with praise and thanksgiving.

Just as we do here at St Thomas today.
 He had truly and earnestly repented of his sins,
 he had received the forgiveness of God
 and his sins were washed away.
 The wall of sin separating him from God
 And from mankind had fallen.
 His separosy had been cured but unlike the 9;
 the Samaritan had taken the Hand of God
 and returned to Him.
 His faith had made him whole. He was fully restored to
 God. Can you imagine what the rest of his life must have
 been like?

So the enacted parable of the 10 lepers is ended.
 How does it inform our lives? So what?

The story of the 10 lepers contains many lessons for us to
 take with us as we re-enter the world this morning. We
 have considered only a few:

1. The salvation of Jesus, the Christ,
 His forgiveness and love
 Knows no boundary of bias or prejudice
 He is the savior of all mankind
 And all are welcome in His Church
2. We should recognize that by our sins we may become as
 the lepers, unclean and isolated
 before God and Man.
 Once we have become separated from God,
 inexorably
 separosy follows our sins.

2. When we allow ourselves to be separated from God,
(when we contract the “separosy” of our souls)
the only way out
the only cure,
is to fall to our knees
and seek God’s mercy,
His grace
and His help.

Sin begins to build a wall between us and God
and between us and each other.
Seek Him at the first sign of separosy.

3. And once cleansed we should respond as the Samaritan
did:
glorifying God
at the feet of Jesus
with thankful hearts
and accept the opportunity
to restore our lives with God.

4. Let us not be one of the 9.

Amen.

