

“Always the Ones You’d Least Expect”
Christ Church : Summit, NJ
10/14/2007

Luke 17:11-19

17:11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

17:12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 17:13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

17:14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.

17:15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

17:16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

17:17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"

17:18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

17:19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Maybe, when you were growing up or raising your kids and your family went on a long car ride to grandma’s house one state over—back before there were little TVs installed in the headrests of minivans and SUVs—your family played travel games. Of course there’s “I spy”, “the alphabet game”—where you search out street signs beginning with every letter of the alphabet—and there’s also “the license plate game” which is similar to the alphabet game. My brother and I played “punch-bug” and we left bruises on each other’s arms that would last for days every time a Volkswagen Beetle passed. You can imagine how much my Mom did *not* like us playing that game.

In this gospel passage, we're reminded that Jesus, himself, is on a journey. The journey begins in chapter 9, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem," and in chapter 14 we learn that Jesus has gathered followers and is traveling with "large crowds" of people.

Like those games we played, Jesus seems to have a favorite way to pass time on the road—he tells stories. Jesus tells great parables that, for many of us, are some of the most familiar passages in the whole Bible. He has a story about a lost sheep and a shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 and doesn't rest until he finds that missing one. The story of the prodigal son is among these stories as well.

Jesus' road stories aren't all happy-go-lucky. He tells a story about a poor beggar named Lazarus who lives at the gate of a very rich man. Every day, Lazarus longs to satisfy his hunger with the crumbs from the rich man's table. When Lazarus and the rich man die, Lazarus goes to his heavenly resting place with all the great saints around him and the rich man is no longer so fortunate.

So, in the midst of these great fables about the love of God and life and care for our neighbors, Jesus is interrupted by a pack of lepers who apparently know his name and that he's someone to be revered because they call out to him, "Master," which is a word that is only used by Jesus' disciples in the rest of the gospel of Luke.

So, the 10 lepers, “keeping their distance,” call out to Jesus in unison, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Where were they before? Were they hiding from Jesus? Were his disciples and followers trying to shoo them away so that Jesus wouldn’t have to be bothered? Societal laws required all leprous persons be removed from their villages because of ritual uncleanness. If the leprosy went into remission, or was miraculously healed, the leper went to the priests and they verified that the person was now clean.

There is some evidence, however, that these laws were not always followed. It’s just as likely that these 10 lepers emerge from within the village that Jesus has just entered. We could just as easily imagine that a group of local mothers and wives gathered together their loved ones who were infected by the disease and sent them to Jesus because they heard he could help them. Maybe the whole village stood behind these 10 and commissioned them to go receive healing. **(Like the friends who bring the paralytic to Jesus and lower him through the ceiling. Matt 9:6)**

Still, when they approach, the 10 keep their distance. Whether they were being kept at a distance from Jesus by his disciples or they were following societal laws, Jesus bridges the distance between him and the 10 lepers when he sees them and there’s a moment between them that transcends explanation. I think we have to wonder what happens in that moment when Jesus *sees* them.

They haven't yet told Jesus what it is they want from him and yet he seems to know because in the next line he tells them to go to the priest—the only one by law who can certify that they have been made clean.

It's interesting in this passage that the only information we're given about the ten who are healed is that they are lepers. It's as if the whole of their existence can be summed up in their disease. And that's probably the way many of the people traveling with Jesus thought of them. Here comes this merry band of Jesus-followers traveling down the yellow brick road, listening to stories about the emerald city and then out of nowhere, flying monkeys, the wicked witch, lepers!

That might be too dramatic. The experience might be more akin to a night in the city with a few of our closest friends. We get all dressed up and we paid a lot of money in parking and babysitters and we really just want to have dinner at a nice restaurant and see a good show. We're walking up 9th Ave. to avoid Times Square when all of a sudden 10 homeless people approach us from out of nowhere. We do the obvious thing and give them a few bucks because it's uncomfortable, but they're not going away, and now they're now asking where we're going and what we're up to. *What* do we do?

Jesus sees them. I don't think Jesus uses some sort of supernatural X-ray vision that gives him an omniscient narrator's glimpse into the plight of these 10

people. Rather, where everyone else has hurried past or maybe thrown a few coins in their direction, Jesus stops and really *sees* these 10 for what they are—children of God.

What must it have been like to be among those 10? Can you imagine? I can't. In Illinois, during the last week of April, Jerry Miller became the nation's 200th person exonerated by DNA evidence from a crime he didn't commit. Miller was convicted of rape, robbery and kidnapping at age 23 and spent the next quarter century wrongly imprisoned. From his church, the Zion Christian Center in Dolton, IL, Miller made a statement to the press. He said, "I am not angry. I am thankful and I feel proud of myself, I accomplished what I set out to do -- to show that they lied on me.... I made it. I'm not swept under the rug anymore." (Chicago Tribune)

Jerry Miller is the one out of the ten who, when he realized he'd been healed, turned back to praise God. The other nine, what happened to them? Jesus doesn't know either. He asks the one who returned, let's call him Jerry, "Jerry, were not ten healed? But the other nine, where are they?" Maybe Jerry replied, "They went to the priests like you told them. From there, I don't know."

Maybe they didn't even stop to see the priest. Who could blame them for rushing off? If I was Jerry Miller, I don't know that the first thing out of my mouth, after 24 years wrongfully imprisoned, would have been, "I'm thankful." I

might have said, “I’m mad as hell, and I want justice!” Maybe some of those other nine lepers went into town seeking justice on people who mocked them or drove them out years before. Maybe some went to the priest because they were good law abiding citizens. Maybe some went back to their wives or husbands and picked up their children, who were now all grown, for the first time in a long time. Maybe a few of them were business owners and they went straight to their shops to see how business was doing and if the books had been kept up to date. We don’t know because the nine who don’t turn back to thank Jesus don’t make it any farther in the story.

But there’s one in the ten whose response to this healing is so great, so grateful that it makes the headlines. We could imagine a life for the one, like we did for the other nine. Maybe he didn’t have a family to go back to. Maybe he never went to school and starting a business was something he never aspired to do. Maybe this nomadic band of marginalized people had become his family and now the band was broken up and he wasn’t in any hurry to get back into the rat race.

Regardless of the circumstances, this one has a new lease on life and it is a gift from God. And the first thing this former leper turned human being wants to do with that new life is glorify God. We see and hear in the response of that one all the truth in the world: that every good gift is from God. We learn from the

one that life isn't just about getting what we want or what we need, it's about that more profound sense of giftedness that, from time to time, causes us to fall down on our knees in gratitude to God and the ones who bear God in our lives.

This story isn't just about a physical healing, which is a great miracle in itself. It is about restoration of life and community. Being seen by Jesus is about mending marriages and making things right with old friends. It's about turning over a new leaf and setting the prisoners free. It's about feeding the hungry by inviting them over for dinner and about clothing the naked, not just by cleaning out our closets, but by standing up against the systems that stole their clothing in the first place.

Whether we identify with the 9 lepers who left the scene in a rush, the 1 who stayed to praise God or perhaps, Jesus, who brings God into the world where God is most urgently needed, there is good news! The gospel for us today is that God has something for us all. There are opportunities to heal and to be healed, all around us, in the life of faith. There is forgiveness when we rush away from the scene, like the nine who never turned back, forgetting the one from whom all blessings flow. There is grace and life and mercy and love for all who come to God pleading, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"