

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Luke 17:11-19

Sermon Title: "... And Only One Came Back" (Journeys through Luke's Gospel)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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The story we just read is very simple: ten lepers were healed from their diseases, and only one came back to give thanks to Jesus. Ten people were given new leases on life, and only one seemed to be truly grateful for it.

Leprosy is a disease which takes over a person's body, causing it to fail over a long period of time. It was as debilitating in Jesus' time as Alzheimer's is today. Alzheimer's works on people over a long period of time, causing them to waste away mentally.

Nobody wanted to help people with leprosy in Jesus' time. The disease was highly contagious and no real cure existed. If the person was not quarantined, then others would come down with the disease, and more lives would be threatened. Nobody wanted to even consider helping a person with leprosy, and that is why they were treated as outcasts. Socially, these people were shunned, rejected, told to go far away. If a leper was walking down the street, and he was upwind from others, the leper had to

stand at least 50 yards away or get out of the wind altogether.¹ To keep from spreading the infection, lepers had to cover their entire bodies with a lot of clothing; and then, they could be picked out easily in a town.

If these unfortunate people were treated like scum socially, they didn't fare any better spiritually. It was thought that lepers must have committed a terrible sin against God, and so the disease came upon them as a terrible punishment. These people must be awful worms, so nobody wanted to come near their ungodliness, as not to be infected by it. If leprosy was contagious, then their sin must be, too. So, they were not permitted to worship in the temple or to have fellowship in the synagogue. They developed their own communities outside a town, so they may have some interaction with others.

Having leprosy was worse than being in jail. The disease literally took over a person's life socially and spiritually, and the stress one endured under its shackles was unbearable.

In our story today, we can vaguely understand what the ten lepers felt. We have an idea of what it must have been like to be rejected at every turn. There was no cure to their disease, so there was no

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, cf. 226.

cure to their unhappiness.

But what if we had a terrible disease that seemed incurable, and someone cured us? What if somebody actually acknowledged our existence, and offered a solution to our problems, and that solution worked... How would we feel? How would we react? We probably won't be able to hold back our thanksgiving. We may bow several times to our new friend and thank him or her again and again and again. We might wrap our arms around that person and give the person a big bear hug. We may even thank the person every time we see him or her, and we would point out the person to others, calling the person a miracle worker. We would be ecstatic about our recovery, wouldn't we? We are now free to worship God and free to walk among people without question.

But when ten lepers are healed of their disease, only one comes back. When ten lepers are released from the jail of their torment, only one returns to Jesus to thank him again and again and again.

Years ago, I heard an Episcopal minister preach on this text. He examined each of the nine ex-lepers, and then speculated on the reasons why they did not go back to Jesus. Maybe we might identify with one or more of these reasons.

The first ex-leper had too many things to do in his

life to be bothered with the disease. Deadlines, schedules, and meetings determined and controlled his life. He never had time to listen to another person's concerns and joys, even before he contracted the disease. His interests always lay in getting business done and moving on to the next item on the calendar. Although the disease put him on the sidelines, he still sat with datebook in hand and planned the next meeting and the next proposition.

When Jesus healed him, it was as though the starting gates opened and the horse could run the race again. He was back at his job, networking with clients and making large-cash deals. Such a person is the type who needs "to stop and smell the roses once in a while." If you ask this person if he sits down with God for 10 or 15 minutes per day, he would say, "No, can't do it. Got to work."

The second ex-leper simply didn't know how to say Thank you. This ex-leper took things for granted. Of course, people are supposed to bag my groceries and repair my vehicle and hold the door for me and do what I ask them to do. There is no reason to say Thank You, because they are supposed to do those things anyhow. The second ex-leper never realized that a Thank You goes a long way. A Thank You says to people that we do appreciate their work, whether

they are supposed to do it or not. A Thank You opens doors for more grace and more thanksgiving to enter through.

Ten lepers were healed of their terrible disease, but only one came back.

Continuing on: ex-lepers three and four were going to thank Jesus once they showed themselves to the priest, but after everything was finished they forgot about it. How many times have we planned to do something and then forgotten about it? We put notes on the refrigerator or on the bathroom mirror. We write them in date planners and smartphones. We keep telling ourselves, “I gotta do this later, I gotta do this later.” However, situations come up unexpectedly, or it takes more time to accomplish certain tasks. At the end of the day, we go back to our calendars or walk past the bathroom mirror, and there is always that one task we forgot about.

For the third and fourth ex-leper, though, what they forgot to do was the most important thing for them to do. It should have been Priority One on their list, giving thanks to our Lord for his healing work. Our relationship with God should always be on our minds. Giving thanks to God for tasks accomplished and for good things received should always be high on

our lists.

Ex-lepers five and six didn't return thanks because they felt obligated to give something back to Jesus. Here's a ten-dollar word: reciprocity (the need to give somebody something for the gift that you received from that person). The author Jan Karon wrote the Mitford books years ago about Father Tim who served an Episcopal church in the small town of Mitford. In one of her books, Karon writes about church casseroles: "In the language of food, there are casseroles, and there are casseroles. Most were used to comfort the sick or inspire the down-hearted. [Sometimes they were used to tempt the stomach of the clergyman]. In any case, there was always the problem of what to do with the dish. Decent people returned it full of something else. Which meant that the person to whom you returned it would be required, at some point, to give another food item, all of which produced a cycle that was unimaginably tedious."² When these ex-lepers received gifts, they always felt obligated to give a gift, which they didn't want to do. They didn't want to get caught in that unimaginably tedious cycle, so they just walked away from Jesus. They hoped that Jesus would just understand and walk away, too.

² Jan Karon, *A Light in the Window: The Mitford Years*, 12.

Ten ex-lepers walked away, but only one came back to thank Jesus.

The seventh ex-leper didn't give thanks to Jesus because she thought her healing occurred through some other means. Was it really Jesus who healed her, or was it that over-the-top health regiment that she had been on for months? She was told to eat the healthiest foods and follow that high-energy cardio workout video, and in no time she would be cured. And it seemed to work. The leprosy was gone. She could now stand in front of her bathroom mirror, and take Selfies of herself, and claim that all this occurred because she did it on her own. She got herself in the best shape of her life, and Jesus really had nothing to do with it. Jesus could not have possibly turned her entire life around.

The eighth ex-leper didn't return because she expected healing to occur. Of course, great things happen when a person calls upon the name of Jesus. When people call upon the Name, they get their expected blessings. They receive their promised financial gain. They claim victory. There is no need to thank a Savior who is going to give us everything anyhow. And especially when we call upon the name of Christ, because his name is like a magic

incantation, right? His name is like a magician saying, “Hocus Pocus,” and that rabbit will come out of the hat. It is a given. It must happen, because Jesus supposed promised power in his name. So why thank him? Just keep using his name until it has been overused, and everybody’s has gotten every selfish thing they want.

And the final ex-leper could not thank Jesus because he could not let go of the pain and agony he went through as a leper. He had lost his family. He had lost his standing in the community. He had lost his income and career. These are tragedies that people do not get over too quickly. We talked about leprosy causing a person to become isolated from others. Socially and spiritually, they were treated as outcasts. This is a serious matter, to be isolated like that, to be rejected as somebody who is less than human.

And even when the ex-leper is healed, he could not let go of the shame. He could not let go of the pain he felt for being treated so badly. His sorrow became a trap for him to be stuck in, even though the leprosy itself was gone. He could return to his family. He could look to secure another career and income. He could go to the synagogue and mingle with other believers. The priest would see that he is cured and may return to worship. But the ex-leper was still

stuck in his trap. It didn't feel right. He had to continue to wallow in that pain. He had to hold on to that agony, and still act as though he was an outcast.

Nine ex-lepers were healed from a debilitating disease and didn't return to give thanks to Jesus. We are left with the only one who came back.

As this person walked toward the temple, the impact of this radical transformation must have hit the person like a ton of bricks. Not only did he look different from the outside, but also from the inside he noticed his heart, his mind, and his faith had completely changed. All he asked for was a healing, and in the end he received so much more.

Transformation, renewal, life. He was amazed by the change. Did Jesus really do all of that for him. Did Jesus really do that for those nine lepers? We are all transformed from sickness and isolation to health and community, for Jesus wants to transform us always.

All the tenth ex-leper could think of was Jesus. Loud praises and extreme gratitude had to be shared with Jesus. Nothing else mattered at that moment. Family, community, career, material possessions, reputation: who cared? Only Jesus, the Center of this ex-leper's life. The Hub to which all the important things of his life were attached. Jesus was the first and foremost priority of her life, as Jesus should have

been for the other ex-lepers.

There is an old Russian proverb which says: “Those who have the disease called Jesus will never be cured”³ Seized by the Holy Spirit. Overwhelmed by the power of God. Moved by the compassion of Christ. One is never cured of those things, and nobody ever wants to be. One day long ago, ten lepers lived a life of banishment and excommunication because of leprosy. No cure could ever be offered to them, except Jesus. Jesus was their only cure. He healed them all and changed their lives forever. Nine left to do their own things, and only one came back.

Despite those odds, though, we are thankful for this one Samaritan who came back. It is nice to know that when we turn to Christ, he will raise us from our sicknesses and heal us through and through. With him, we may walk the paths ahead of us as reborn people.

³ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Embracing the Unconditional Love of God*, 198.

The Assurance of Pardon:

The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 40 the theme of redemption: “I waited patiently for the Lord, who inclined his ear and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the muck and mire.” Through Christ, God the Father sets our feet on solid ground. Through Christ, the Holy Spirit puts a new song of love and peace in our mouths. Through Christ, we see and fear God, for we are all forgiven. Thanks be to God! Amen.

