

Luke 17: 11-19 “Our Greatest Joy”

Yes, Luke reminds us again that we are still following Jesus and his disciples as they make their way toward Jerusalem. For the last several weeks, we’ve been listening in as Jesus taught, in parables, sometimes the disciples, sometimes the Pharisees and the scribes. But today, none of those characters are around, and you and I are witnessing an encounter... or encounters... of ten men who had leprosy and Jesus.

Leprosy today is known as Hansen’s disease, but in the biblical world, it referred to the conditions of a wide range of skin diseases. It was a “social disease,” because if you had leprosy, you had to live in isolation outside the boundary of the community-life. This is why those ten men with leprosy called out to Jesus from a distance, “have mercy on us!” The word must have had reached even to them that Jesus was a healer.

When Jesus saw them, he told them to go and show themselves to the priest, not a doctor. This may sound strange to us, but leprosy was also a “religious” disease; it made you “ritually unclean.” If you were fortunate enough to recover, you needed a priest, not a doctor, to certify that you were clean again before you could re-enter the society. By the regulations in the Law of Moses, you were required to cry out

“unclean, unclean” whenever people came near, so they can avoid you.

Most of us know by now that isolation, or even just quarantine due to medical necessity is tough enough, without the added shame that strips off our human dignity. The isolation these people with leprosy suffered had impact beyond their medical concerns; it must have broken their psyche.

Then again, this should not be so unfamiliar to us, if we only recalled how our society has treated people with certain diseases, medical or physical or psychological conditions, in our modern and largely secular world. Perhaps you know the terrible, isolating feeling of not being seen for the whole person that you are, because of some stigma. Perhaps you’ve seen how people are labeled and defined by some condition they have, or who they happen to be, that makes them less than acceptable or welcome member in our society.

Or perhaps you can recall a time when you could not get over some superficial thing about a person to get to know the person, or you allowed something about the person get in the way of really seeing that person in their full humanity.

So, those ten men, physically, socially, and spiritually deprived men, cried out to Jesus to have mercy on them, when they should have been saying instead “unclean, unclean.” And they were crying out

loud to him from afar, and Luke tells us, Jesus saw them. He didn't just hear their cry but saw them.

Having seen them, all Jesus did was to tell them to go and show themselves to the priests. And as they went, as they followed Jesus's words, they found themselves made clean. Yes, here Luke writes they were "made clean," not "healed." Sure, since it was the symptoms of leprosy that had made them "unclean," being "made clean" implies that the symptoms were gone. But Jesus himself say they had been "made clean."

"Were not Ten made clean?" Jesus asked, when one of the ten, who happened to be a Samaritan came back to thank Jesus; the Jews saw Samaritans as heretics.

This Samaritan, when he SAW that he'd been healed, turned back, praising God, and threw himself at Jesus feet and thank him. And now, Jesus says "your faith has "made you well." Not just made clean, but "made well." This word Jesus used also means to be "made whole," and to "be saved."

Jesus removed leprosy from all ten men, cleansed them so they are restored as full members of their community, but the one who acknowledged what Jesus had done for him and turned back, praising God, to thank Jesus, was not only healed physically, but made whole spiritually. In that moment of acknowledging the source of his

wellness, in that turning back and giving thanks and praising God, this Samaritan saw God who saw him and had mercy. In that moment, he saw he was in a relationship with God and stepped into it.

Luke describes him as praising God with a loud voice and prostrating himself at Jesus' feet and thanking him. If that's not an expression of one's greatest joy, what is? I can almost see this man jumping into the bosom of God, into God's embrace, finally united with the very source of his being. Jesus names what happened; he was made well, made whole, saved.

If the story of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep behind to go look for the one that is lost, and the story of the woman who had ten coins but turns her house upside down in search of one missing coin, if those stories were about our collective, communal wholeness, the wholeness that God insists on for God's beloved community, this story of Jesus' encounter with one man out of ten, who turned back to give thanks and praise to God is a story that's personal.

Jesus's encounter with this Samaritan is our encounter with Jesus. It points us to our personal wholeness and what it takes for you and me as an individual to be made whole as a child of God. It takes for us to wake up to, and step into the relationship with the One who meets us in our physical, social, psychological, and spiritual brokenness, and deliver us and cause us to sing God's praise,

Halleluiah. To be able to give thanksgiving and praise, no matter what the circumstance because we know we are in relationship with our life-giving, ever-loving Creator, is our deepest joy.

I'm going to quote a poet-singer-songwriter-preacher well known to you. Almost exactly a year ago, you've heard him say "praise grows from the reality of our hurt, our pain, and God meeting us there...not from when everything is just dandy with us. God meets us at the point of the broken Hallelujah." I almost asked Pastor Shannon to sing Leonard Cohen's song Halleluiah again today.

We are brought into that redeeming relationship with God when we see God for who God is, as revealed to us, because God always sees us for who we are, God's Beloved.

Rev. Herb Anderson, my pastor at Brick Presbyterian Church in NYC once said he supposed folks who are oblivious to God's work in their lives could live good, meaningful lives. But when we turn back to God and say thank you, it's like saying to God "I love you, too." That's a relationship made whole, a loving union with God, which is our salvation.

God's grace touches us all, the grateful and the ungrateful. God loves everyone; believers and nonbelievers, those who trust in God and those who don't. But to give thanks and praise to God brings us

back into relationship with God in whom we are whole. To give thanks and praise to God, to sing Halleluiah, is our greatest joy.

And our personal experience of wholeness in God does not just stop with us. God is way more economical than that. Jesus calls us to model this relationship in our encounters with those whose needs we see. Whether you faithfully pick up that teenager at the bus stop every day or get creative with your cooking so that the finicky eater gets good nutrition, the young people you care for typically takes it for granted that you're just doing your job. But at one point, the kiddo sees what you do for their wellness, and for the first time, the words of gratitude are on their lips, not because they remembered their manners but because they felt it. May they see, behind your tender hands God's loving hands, and in your faithfulness, the faithfulness of Christ, their savior, and may they, too, sing, Halleluiah. Amen.