

Blessed Twice

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 10-13-19
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Waunakee, WI

Does not Jesus say to the ten lepers, "Go and show yourselves to the priests?" He doesn't say anything about coming back to tell him what the priests said or did; he doesn't mention that he expects the lepers to return and thank him for their healing.

Yet when one **does** come back to thank him, he asks, "The other nine, where are they?"

Down through the ages the nine non-returning lepers have been roundly condemned, ridiculed, and held up as glaring examples of insensitivity and lack of gratitude. How many sermons based on this story have been used to berate congregations for not being thankful enough, especially at Thanksgiving season?

But can we not say a few words in defense of the nine? They do seem to be law-abiding citizens of their time. They travel in groups, as was the custom for lepers. They stay at a safe distance from other people so as to avoid the risk of spreading disease.

The story takes pains to point out that the one who returns is a Samaritan. Therefore, the nine must be Jews. But here they are accepting a despised Samaritan into their group. They travel with him. They share their meager food with him. Remember that in that culture Jews and Samaritans had nothing to do with each other.

Of course, it is their common despair which helps break down the ancient barriers between them. They are **all** outcasts; Samaritan and Jew alike. But the Jewish lepers could well have driven the Samaritan from their midst with harsh words, such as, "Leprosy makes us unclean enough without adding the uncleanness of the cursed Samaritan."

Can we not credit the nine with at least a sense of confidence, even of faith, in Jesus? They evidently recognize him, for they call him by name. They address him as "Master," a title usually reserved by Luke for used by disciples. "Jesus, Master," they cry in a loud voice.

I wonder if all ten are not somewhat puzzled when Jesus says simply, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." He doesn't touch them as he has done with other lepers. He doesn't pray over them. He doesn't even declare them cleansed.

But the implication is clear. There were elaborate rules for the cleansing of lepers. Going to the priest was the last step in the ritual. The priest did not heal the leper; the priest just confirmed the cure. It was necessary for the priest to declare the leper healed so that the person could return to family and society and to a normal life.

It seems to me that it takes some measure of faith for the lepers to begin their journey to the priests while the marks of leprosy are still on their bodies. **"And as they went, they were made clean."**

We don't know how far they traveled before someone begins to notice a dramatic change in their condition. Perhaps one feels a sensation like a cool breeze on the skin. He looks at his hands. They are smooth and free of sores. He lifts his robe and examines his legs. No longer are they disfigured and discolored.

There is a shout. "It's gone! My leprosy is gone!"

Then all the others with great excitement and anticipation examine themselves and find that they all are cured. An almost overwhelming sense of wholeness sweeps over the group. They cry out in joy and wonder.

And so they take off down the road as fast as their legs will carry them. Their one thought is to reach the priests and be set free.

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That is, all but one. One stands in the road, amazed. His mind goes back to the man to whom he pled for mercy. He is immersed in a sea of gratitude.

Now, it may be that since this one is a Samaritan, he is not as concerned about following the letter of the rituals as are his Jewish companions. Since he is considered a heretic, would he go to the same priests as do the others? Perhaps he doesn't feel himself as bound by the Law as do his friends.

In any case, his joy and gratitude overwhelm his strict obedience to Jesus' command. While the others are rushing to the priests, the Samaritan is eagerly retracing his steps to the place where he first met Jesus.

This time, as he approaches Jesus, he does not remain at a distance. He rushes to him and falls at Jesus' feet in gratitude. We are not told what words he used to thank Jesus, if any.

Then, Jesus responds to the healed leper's praise with three questions: Maybe these questions weren't so much to the Samaritan as to whoever could hear. "Were not ten made clean?" "But the other nine, where are they?" "Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

The questions are left hanging in the air for all to hear. Then Jesus adds a benediction and a blessing to the Samaritan's joy. "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

What do you think? Does the man ever go and show himself to the priest? The story does not tell us one way or the other. But we can be sure that the nine complete their ritual journey. Without a doubt, they appear before the priests and are declared clean. And then what?

They have obeyed Jesus' command. They are now well. Their story has a happy ending. But their story is incomplete. They have no idea what they have missed. If that Samaritan ever meets his former companions, he can tell them what is lacking in their story.

He can tell them about a new found freedom which lives not by the strict fulfilling of rules, but goes **beyond obedience** into joyful gratitude. He can tell them that while their bodies may be cured, their spirits can fully live only through worship and thanks to God.

For those of us who follow the rules and do what is expected, this story of the ten lepers is not a "cute little story." The question which haunts us is: "The other nine, where are they?"

Where is the exuberant praise, the extravagant gratitude, the joyful freedom in living, the willingness to go beyond what is required?

What it would be like, in my daily life, to be motivated by being thankful to God. My guess is that it is a great deal more freeing than always asking, "What is expected of me?"

The only way I am going to find out is to try it. May we follow the footsteps of the Samaritan this week.

And the people said.....Amen!