

Gospel - Luke 17: 11-19

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The Samaritan Leper

The gospel of Luke is rich with accounts of Jesus providing physical and spiritual healing to those who suffer:

In the fourth chapter, Jesus stands over Simon Peter's mother-in-law and heals her fever. Later that day "any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them."

Further on in Chapter 4, Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit.

In Chapter 5, Jesus heals a leper in verses 12-16. The account reads like this:

Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.' Immediately the leprosy left him. And he ordered him to tell no one. 'Go', he said, 'and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.' But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

Later, in Chapter 5, Jesus heals a paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof into the middle of a crowd with the words, "Your sins are forgiven you."

In Chapter 6, we read:

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

In Chapter 7 Jesus heals a Centurion's servant from afar and raises a widow's only son from the dead. He casts demons out of man and into a herd of swine that run off a cliff and drown, and heals a distraught father's dying daughter. A woman who has been bleeding for 12 years is healed when she touches the hem of his robe. After confronting her, Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

In Chapter 9, a man begs for his son to be healed from a demon and it is done. In Chapter 11, Jesus casts out a demon allowing a mute man to speak. In Chapter 13, on the Sabbath, Jesus heals the woman who had been bent over for 18 years. In Chapter 14, also on the Sabbath, he heals a man who had dropsy.

And now, in Chapter 17, Jesus is travelling between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. As he enters a village, ten lepers approach him. Keeping their distance, they call out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Here, we need to know some things about leprosy in Biblical times. The first is that the leprosy referred to in both the Old and New Testaments is not the modern day disease of leprosy.

In an article adapted by the Nepal Leprosy Trust, Dr. Jeanie Cochrane Oldman writes:

The condition described as leprosy in the Old Testament section of the Bible is NOT the same as modern leprosy or Hansen's Disease, as it is often called. The Hebrew word sara'at [which was later translated into Greek as lepra] is a ritualistic term denoting uncleanness or defilement and covered a range of conditions that could affect people, or clothing, or even a wall. The conditions described could include boils, carbuncles, fungus infections, infections complicating a burn, impetigo, favus of the scalp, scabies, patchy eczema, phagedenic ulcer, and impetigo or vitiligo on people. On walls or clothes, it was more likely to be fungus, mold, dry rot, lichen or similar conditions.

Even an article from the Jewish Encyclopedia published back in 1906 notes that:

Zara'at was looked upon as a disease inflicted by God upon those who transgressed His laws, a divine visitation for evil thoughts and evil deeds. Every leper mentioned in the Old Testament was afflicted because of some transgression. "Miriam uttered disrespectful words against God's chosen servant Moses, and, therefore, was she smitten with leprosy. Joab, with his family and descendants, was cursed by David for having treacherously murdered his great rival Abner. Gehazi provoked the anger of Elisha by his mean covetousness, calculated to bring the name of Israel into disrepute among the heathen. King . . . Uzziah was smitten with incurable leprosy for his alleged usurpation of priestly privileges in burning incense on the golden altar of the Temple."

It would have been quite natural for the people . . . to have regarded persons afflicted with zara'at as transgressors; they had violated the laws of God and their transgressions had been great, else they would not have been so afflicted.

One had to be clean and pure in order to come before God in worship. In that prescientific era before the understanding of viruses, bacteria, and the mechanics of how disease spreads, God gives explicit instructions about how to deal with leprosy in order to prevent the spread of sin and sin-induced diseases. The entirety of Chapter 13 in the book of Leviticus is devoted to diagnosing leprosy and other skin conditions. Anyone suspected of having this condition, needed to go to a priest for examination—and often repeated examinations, casting the priest in the role of dermatologist and judge.

If found to be infected, the law says that “the leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip [his mustache], and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Leviticus 13:2-3, 45-46).

Why were lepers subject to such harsh public ostracism? The website gotquestions.org provides some rationale:

Among the 61 defilements of ancient Jewish laws, leprosy was second only to [coming into contact with] a dead body in seriousness. A leper wasn't allowed to come within six feet of any other human, including his own family. The disease was considered so revolting that the leper wasn't permitted to come within 150 feet of anyone when the wind was blowing. Lepers lived in a community with other lepers until they either got better or died.

The 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia says that this practice of exiling lepers gave rise to the segregation of those suffering from modern leprosy, even though the disease is not highly contagious. It also says this:

There is much reason to believe that the segregation of lepers was regarded . . . more in the light of a religious ceremonial than as a hygienic restriction.

Writers who hold the view that the exclusion of lepers had chiefly a religious significance conclude from these facts that lepers were obliged to remain outside the camp because they were regarded as likely to morally infect others.

As we return specifically to today's scripture, I offer a few more thoughts from Dr Jeanie Cochrane Oldman and the Nepal Leprosy Trust.

Although modern leprosy had appeared in Israel by the time Christ was living there, we do not know whether the "ten lepers" that were healed by Him had modern leprosy or not. After the four Gospels at the beginning of the New Testament, there is no further mention of leprosy in the Bible.

[And as for] practical applications of this understanding:

- 1. For "leprosy" in the Old and New Testaments, read "defilement," or "ceremonial defilement."*
- 2. We should not say that all disease is a punishment from God. Christ did not do so, and this would be a misinterpretation of suffering.*

With this background and insight, let's revisit the scripture for a close reading and some thoughts about it:

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him.

(Luke 17:11-12a)

It's possible that this village is composed completely of lepers; of people cast out of their hometowns in both Galilee and Samaria, and together they've formed this community of outcasts.

Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (v. 12b-13)

Word of Jesus's power to heal has spread everywhere, even in this village in no-man's land. Throughout the gospels, people are desperate for healing and come to Jesus for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways.

In the case of these lepers, why not ask Jesus for healing? He might say no, but having been exiled from home and family, they really have nothing left to lose. And I wonder if there were other lepers in that place who didn't come forward, who stayed in their misery without reaching out for help when Jesus came.

Though they've been banished, these ten lepers are still observing the law. They keep their distance, unlike the leper earlier in this gospel who broke the law to bow at Jesus's feet and ask to be made clean.

Maybe this group of ten stands six feet away from Jesus, or maybe the wind is blowing and they're shouting from 150 feet away. Either way, they've summoned the courage to ask for mercy. And Jesus responds:

When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." (v. 14a)

Jesus doesn't touch these lepers, as he did the one begging at his feet. He doesn't need to. This isn't the first time Jesus has directed his healing energy without touching those who are afflicted. Sometimes they weren't even present. From a distance, he sees their affliction and isolation in this village where they've been banished between two fractious regions. Jesus recognizes that they are literal outsiders.

Before the lepers are even aware that healing has begun, he sends them home, back to the priests who can give them "a clean bill of health" and restore them to home, family, religious, and community life.

"And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back..." (v. 14b-15a)

Healing, at least for the one who turned back seemed to happen soon after he walked away, in a short enough period of time that he could turn around, and still find Jesus there.

We don't know about the others. When their physical symptoms disappeared, when they noticed, or how they reacted. But we can assume that they were also grateful. Wouldn't each of us be?

Praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. (v. 15b-16a)

The Samaritan is overcome with gratitude, and sets aside his objective—to go to the priest for reinstatement into the community—to offer thanks and praise to Jesus, the one who brought about healing. He is grateful for the healing in and of itself before, or even if, anything else in his life changes.

"And he was a Samaritan." (v. 16b)

This fact is a big deal every time it comes up in the gospels. Franciscan Media provides some useful descriptions of the rift between the Jews and the Samaritans for us modern readers:

Imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in modern Bosnia, the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or the feuding between street gangs in Los Angeles or New York, and you have some idea of the feeling and its causes between Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus. Both politics and religion were involved.

Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean?" (v. 17a)

Is this a rhetorical question, or is it possible that Jesus didn't get close enough to really see each person clearly? The answer may not matter much.

"But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (v. 17-18)

Those who leave and don't return are simply doing what Jesus told them to do. They are eager to go to the priests with their newly unblemished bodies so they can be reunited with loved ones and belong again.

Perhaps the nine are all Galileans, and they've left together along the same road to return to their towns and villages in Galilee, having something in common besides their leprosy and ostracization.

I can imagine being one them, caught up in the anticipation, and then joy of reunification, and later wanting to seek Jesus out to thank him, only to find that he'd already left. He was, after all, on his way to Jerusalem.

The Samaritan may have been on his own, the only Samaritan among the ten, the only one from his village. Jesus implies that he was. Though he was part of this community of outcasts, now that they are healed, he doesn't belong with them. He is still an outsider.

I don't think the point of this scripture is to focus on the ingratitude of the nine, and I don't think it's meant to shame us into feeling guilty when we're part of the 90% and caught up in the drama of the moment, the times we've been overwhelmed and forgotten to say "thank you" in the moment we received healing, grace, mercy, and love. And, I don't think the purpose is to glorify being an extreme outsider, like the Samaritan leper.

Instead, I think that Jesus finds his assumptions and his own cultural beliefs challenged here. This isn't the first time he's been surprised by the depth of faith and the actions of those outside the Jewish community he came to minister to.

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

What does "your faith has made you well" mean? Is there a difference between being "cured" and being "made well"?

Is there a difference between approaching Jesus out of an I'll-try-anything desperation and approaching with a belief that he can and will heal you? Is that what distinguishes the Samaritan leper from the other nine?

That may be true. But I sense another important distinction between the nine who rushed to the priests, and the one who turned back. It seems to me the faith that made the Samaritan leper well is his trust in his own experience of healing and inclusion in God's kin-dom; a recognition that faith and belief don't rely on following rules to the letter and the stamp of approval of those with religious authority, but rather faith and belief come from our recognition and acceptance of God's love freely offered.

Accepting grace seems simple enough, but remnants of legalism still plague us. Though our understanding of illness and infectious disease have shifted radically since the time of Jesus, we still struggle with the idea of illness being a consequence of sin, particularly as it pertains to addiction:

Liver failure in alcoholics and dental decay in meth addicts often seem to us like fitting consequences for sin. "They brought it upon themselves" we say of the results of destructive. We think of such suffering God's judgment, and see it as right punishment for sin—for our inability to master our impulses and behavior and overcome our brokenness.

But even when we find better ways to cope with our brokenness, pain, and anxiety, turning from our sinful ways, becoming born again, and overcoming addiction doesn't necessarily restore us to physical and mental health, as much as we hope and pray it will.

We have centuries of history showing our human tendency to look for sin, for uncleanness, for explanation and justification of the human condition so that we can attempt to control life. We formulate rules, and opt for blame and punishment when we break them, as a way to keep ourselves safe: from bad decisions, mental and physical illness, from addiction, from pain and heartbreak.

I knew a woman who built a house with her husband, and that process brought out long-buried issues in their marriage. At the same time, her husband was diagnosed with cancer. Rather than face the hard truths of their relationship, and her own part in the pain, she became convinced that the sin

of her husband's anger was the direct cause of his cancer. It was all his fault, and she was off the hook.

But the world is too complicated, and our lives too intricate and nuanced for such simplistic cause and effect.

And sometimes, contrary to what we might think, illness itself doesn't bring despair or thoughts of sin, it returns us to belief. You have probably witnessed this in someone you know, or even in your own life.

As humans, we are all frail, we all suffer, we're all afflicted, we're all outsiders at one time or another, and it is faith that can restore us to a wholeness in relationship with God, even if our conditions aren't healed.

In this gospel lesson, the ten lepers remind us to risk advocating for ourselves, to risk being told no, and to risk being told yes.

The Samaritan leper reminds us to:

- Ask for what our hearts desire even from those we think would never help us.
- Imagine possibilities beyond our present circumstances and limitations.
- Think and act beyond our own self-interest when we have the capacity to do so.
- Offer thanks and praise to God and to those who remind us of God's goodness and presence.
- Live in gratitude.
- Trust our own experience.

And in this encounter, we learn from Jesus to offer our gifts to those outside of our own circle, our own comfort zone, our own community, and our own belief system.

May the wealth contained in this gospel lesson enrich each of our lives. And may our faith truly make us well.