

Luke 17:11-19

Sickness and disease can create strange bed-fellows. Someone you would never consider sharing a room with can end up being your roommate, even for many days, if you have to spend time in a hospital. The nurses don't first try to discover if the two of you are compatible, if you enjoy the same television shows, have similar interests, or are even somewhat close in age. They put you together for one reason—you're both sick. You may not share much of anything else, but you do share the same disease.

That's what drew ten lepers to each other along the border between Samaria and Galilee. The men may not have known each other before they became sick. They may have had nothing much in common. They may not have even liked each other. At least one of the men was a Samaritan, and Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. Yet, here in this make-shift leper colony all ten men forgot about their differences; forgot about their hatred; forgot about anything that might have kept them apart in the outside world—for here they were all alike—ten men with leprosy. They lived together. They suffered together. They were dying together.

And if you care to accept it, so are we. In a very real sense we are those ten lepers. We gather here together, not because we all share the same interests—some of us enjoy sports, others don't; some of us like to hunt and fish, others enjoy quilting and shopping. We are all different ages. We come from different backgrounds. We have different occupations, different goals in life, different ways of looking at the world around us. We may not even particularly enjoy everybody's company. There are different ones here who we may not want to hang out with "out there." But in here we have all been brought together. In here we lay aside our differences. In here none is before or after another. Disease has a way of causing that to happen. And we are all sick...with sin. We have leprosy of the soul. And here within our leper colony we huddle together, just as those ten men did along the border between Samaria and Galilee.

But they were not alone. Jesus was walking their way. And as He met them, they cried out to Him for help. "Jesu...Eleison!" they cried. ("Jesus...have mercy upon us!") These men would feel right at home in our worship, for the words have not changed in 2,000 years. "Kyrie Eleison!" we cry—"Lord, have mercy upon us; Christ, have mercy upon us; Lord, have mercy upon us." We sing these words week after week because the leprosy of our soul has all too well infected our life with sin, and we are powerless to help ourselves.

Oh, we have no problem with feeding our bodies, changing our clothes, going to school, to work, and with making a living. The problem comes each night when we lay our head down upon our pillow and the memory of the day's activities haunts us and makes it difficult for us to sleep. For we are faced with our wretched selfishness—how we lived for our self through the day; how we ignored the needs of others. We are faced with all the hurtful words that we spoke through the day—words of anger at our spouse; words of defiance toward our parents; words that did nothing to honor God and edify our neighbor. Each night we remember all the good which could have been done, but we did not do it because we were too busy living for our self. We could have spent time in God's Word; we could have spoken to a neighbor about coming to church with us; we could have lived a more God-pleasing life, but we were selfish, lazy, afraid, and oh so full of sin.

And so like those ten lepers, we gather here, each one of us infected with the same disease; each one of us unable to help our self—unable, even, to help another. Our leprosy has so taken over our life, and is hurting the lives of those we love, and is, in fact, leading us to the grave and worse. But like those ten men, it is Jesus who comes near to us in our wretched condition, and He comes near to help us. “Kyrie” those men cried, and mercy is what Jesus gave them. “Go,” He said, “show yourselves to the priests.” And on the way they were healed. Their leprosy was gone.

The same powerful word of Christ which healed those lepers is here for you today. “I forgive you,” Jesus says. And those words carry in them the power to do what they say. You are truly forgiven. Your leprosy is healed. That which would destroy you and separate you from God cannot harm you. The word of Christ has cleansed you. Whether your leprosy is in its early stages, or whether it has completely mastered you, each one of you is forgiven, fully cleansed of sin’s disease. Believe this good news with all your heart.

Those ten men believed. They turned to go to the priests even while they were sick! “On the way” they were healed. They took Jesus at His word. Hearing His word they turned to leave even though they were still full of leprosy at the time! And so with us. It may be difficult for us to believe that our sin is completely forgiven, because day after day that same sin keeps raising its ugly head within our heart; it keeps leading us into temptation; it keeps controlling our mind and mouth, our hands and feet. God says that our leprosy is cleansed. In baptism He washed us; He bathed us in the word of Christ. But day after day what we see all too well is that same sinful leprosy eating away at our heart and life.

Anyone with diabetes can tell you why this is. The insulin must be taken day after day to keep their body healthy. For you and me, the insulin is God’s Word. It keeps us safe from the leprosy of our sin. You are forgiven. Jesus did what it took to make this certain. On the cross He became the sinful Leper for you. He suffered your eternal misery. He endured for you the pain of your disease. He died for your sins. And because He rose from the dead, His living words are life for you. His words of mercy protect you from the onslaughts of sin. They keep you safe from sin’s consequences.

You and I will die because we are lepers; but we will rise with Christ because we are forgiven lepers. Our disease cannot destroy us. God declares it so in Christ. You may see the leprosy of sin in your life, but God does not. He sees you, in Christ, a forgiven, holy child, washed perfectly clean in baptism’s waters. And to those waters we need to return day after day. To God’s living Word—His insulin for us—we need to go time after time. We need, again and again, Christ’s body and blood for us in His Sacrament. We need to be that Samaritan leper who returned to Jesus. He didn’t take his cleansing and go. He came back to his Savior.

You and I are God’s forgiven lepers. We are cleansed of our sin in Christ, and because we are safe in Jesus we need to keep coming back to Him in His Word and Sacraments. He will not run from us. He will stay where He has promised to be—here in the preaching and teaching of His pure Word; here in His flesh and blood given and shed for you.

Nine lepers did not return to Jesus; only one came back. You are that one today. Be that one tomorrow. Return to His Word written for you in your Bible at home. Return to His living words given for you here in this sacred place. Return, not because He needs you to

return, but because you and I need Him. We are the lepers. He is the Cure. We are forgiven, not apart from Him, but in connection with Him.

Our little leper colony known as Christ Lutheran Congregation may not seem all that impressive to the outside world, but be assured—Jesus will always be here with you, and for you in His gracious words of life. “Kyrie Eleison” we cry, and the good news for each one of you, my fellow lepers, is that God is merciful; He is full of mercy toward you in Jesus Christ. Amen.