

Luke 17:11-19

Today is not Thanksgiving Day (although we might wonder because of all the delicious food being served up downstairs later), and also because this text in Luke 17 is the Gospel reading appointed for that day...and with good reason; for the Samaritan leper is an example for us of true Christian thankfulness. But there is more to this story than just a theme of thanksgiving. These are truly words of comfort and encouragement for us poor sinners redeemed by a gracious God, who are facing the challenges of life here in mid-October.

In fact the challenges that we face are not all that different from those faced by the ten lepers. They had leprosy, the most feared disease of the day. There was no cure. If you acquired it, you were a dead man. And your death began long before you died. It was a slow, painful death...your skin rotting away, falling out in chunks at times until you could hardly even be recognized as human. People would refuse to look upon you, so hideous a sight you were. You had no family anymore. So contagious was your disease that you had to live alone or in a colony with other lepers just like you. Isolation, misery, with no hope--that was the life of a leper...and perhaps you can relate, for sin like leprosy, can put us in the same predicament.

Sin causes separation...in a marriage, between parents and their children, among members of a congregation who at one time were good friends. Sin erupts in hurtful words and hard feelings. It produces stubborn pride in the heart and a refusal to forgive. Our sin turns us into lepers who live in our painful little worlds of isolation. Oh, we'll form colonies and join with other lepers like us-- people who share our problems and bitterness (for sin is very contagious) so that we can together, speak against our common foes.

And all this isolation and separation reminds us that at one time we were separate from Christ, excluded from His family, having no hope and without God in the world. And even though, in your baptism, He has brought you near to Himself, do you still have fears in your heart and mind about being alone?...alone apart from God? Then, friend, this story in Luke 17 is for you. For that is all these lepers knew...isolation and separation for the rest of their life. And they knew they were going to die, horribly so; their leprosy guaranteed it. And so with us, for we are living in a dying world, and we ourselves are dying, for "the soul that sins, it shall die."

Is there help? Is there hope? Is there a cure for the leprosy of our sin and all the painful consequences it brings? Our help and our hope is the same as that of the lepers. Jesus came their way. He was the One--the only One who could heal their dread disease. And so they raised their pitiful voices as best they could and cried, "Jesu, eleison!" (Jesus, have mercy!) Do you see yourself among that wretched band of men? Do you hear your voice crying out with theirs? Yes, for we, too, know that our help is in the Name of the Lord. "Lord, have mercy upon us," is the constant cry of the Church. We are but beggars before God, and beggars we must be, for beggars have nothing to offer. All beggars can do is to receive. And those ten beggars received what Jesus gave to them. Upon His word of command, they went to the priests, and along the way they were healed.

The same word of Christ is in your midst today. Begging for His mercy, Jesus heals the wounds of your sin. "I forgive you all your sins," He declares through the mouth of His servant; and His word makes it so. Those lepers could not heal themselves. We, also, cannot heal broken marriages and ruined relationships. We cannot pull ourselves out of this world's isolation. We cannot give ourselves hope. But Jesus does. Friend, He says, I have freely forgiven you. I have also forgiven your spouse, your child, your parent, that church member, neighbor, co-worker with whom you are angry. And

you, therefore, dear forgiven child, are now able to forgive them. You are able to speak kindly to others. You are able to live, not in isolation, but as a redeemed, forgiven member of God's family....because it is Christ Himself who is now at work in you.

You are not too hideous for Him to look upon in love. In His Sacraments He even dares to draw near to you, to join Himself to you, to take the leprosy of your sin upon Himself and exchange it for the beautiful covering of His innocence. Your Savior has given you life in His name so that you now are people of hope, confident of your salvation in Jesus Christ, certain of spending eternity with Him as part of His Church Triumphant.

We are like those lepers who were given their life back by Jesus--no longer sorrowful, but joyful, able to live in peace. Now one of those lepers came back. The Samaritan leper returned to Jesus. Why? To thank Him? Yes, but more than that; he came back for more--more love, more mercy, more of God's grace. That wasn't just some miracle worker back there who had healed him. That was his Lord, his Savior. For only God can heal leprosy. That Man was God in the flesh. And so the Samaritan returned and worshiped Jesus. And Jesus gave him more. "Go your way," He told him, "your faith has saved you." All ten received their health; this man received salvation. "Your faith," said Jesus, "has saved you." From what? Leprosy? It saved him from the power of sin, death, and Satan. Jesus always has more to give, and this man was blessed to come back for more. Jesus gave him, on top of his health, faith, forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And isn't that why you come here Sunday mornings? Because Jesus is here, and He always has more to give. Week after week you, the redeemed children of God, like that Samaritan, keep coming back here to your Lord. For you know who He is--God in the flesh who died and rose again for you. And you believe He is here in His Word and Sacraments as He has promised. And you are convinced that He who has given you all things in your baptism, keeps right on giving you more. Mercy upon mercy, and grace upon grace. Jesus never tires of blessing you with His forgiveness and love.

The St. Louis Rams are playing later today, and now that they have tasted victory--winning two games in a row--are they satisfied? They've doubled their win total from a year ago. Why...they should be able to call it a season right now; go home to their families; take the next few months off. But how absurd! They want more. More wins, more victories. They will keep coming back to the stadium for more each and every week.

And also with you. Your victory is in Christ. And you who have already won with Him over sin, death, and Satan, keep coming back to Him to receive more. And as He was there for that leper, every time you come back, Jesus will be here for you, because the thing He loves most of all is to keep blessing you with more and more of His life and forgiveness. Amen.