

Luke 17:11-19

I've never had leprosy. But from what I hear, it's very possibly the worst disease a person could ever acquire. It's a walking death. Some speak of the ravages of war as being "hell on earth." But a leper colony probably comes closer to fitting that definition.

We see such a colony in our text. Ten men, all of them lepers, bound together by their disease. Some, or maybe all of them, had wives and children. But no more. These men were dead to their families. They were not yet in their graves, but all ties and connections with their loved ones, with all humanity, had come to an end. They were lepers...the most dreaded people on the face of the earth.

One of these ten was a Samaritan. He had double the curse upon himself. Rejected by the Jews already for being a Samaritan, now he was rejected, doubly so, for being a leper. But this Samaritan leper was accepted fully and completely by Jesus.

The story of the ten lepers is found nowhere else in the Bible except here in St. Luke's Gospel. And if we were asked to find a similar story, it would be very surprising to most if we were to choose the story, told at Christmastime, of the Wise Men coming to Bethlehem. The Magi were not lepers, and yet they were, as lepers are, a source of great trouble for the Jews living in Jerusalem. Like the Samaritan leper, the Wise Men were strangers, foreigners, not God's chosen people in the pure sense. But as these Wise Men come to Jesus, kneel before Him and worship Him, so the Samaritan leper comes to Jesus, falling on his face at His feet, thanking Him and worshiping Him. Where were the other nine? The same could be asked of the people of Jerusalem. None of them came with the Wise Men to worship Jesus. And neither did the nine lepers return with the Samaritan to fall in worship before Jesus' feet.

The story of the lepers is not about "what," but about "who." It's not the healing that is the most important feature in the story. It's where the healing comes from, and what this says about the man from whom the healing comes. This is not just a story about ten lepers who were healed. For then it would have little meaning for us--a nice, heart-warming story, but that's all, since we're not lepers. But because the story is centered on Jesus, it belongs to us and has great meaning for us.

The closest thing to a resurrection from death is what Jesus gave to these lepers. As they went to see the priest, their skin became renewed--gouges and chasms filling in, the flesh of their ears, nose, and lips would have reappeared where it once was, limbs would have been reattached to their sockets. It was much like ten dead men coming to life. When the Samaritan saw this, he immediately turned around. Seeing the priest for a clean bill of health could wait. Jesus came first. This was not because of his sense of duty. This was his faith in action.

Faith always seeks Jesus first. Sausage and sauerkraut can wait. Coming to kneel before Jesus to feed upon His words of life, to receive His gifts of forgiveness and salvation--this is faith in action. The Samaritan leper realized very clearly that more important than his healing, was the One who gave him back his life. Even lepers who are cleansed will die. But the One who resurrected his flesh from the death of leprosy was also his Savior from sin and hell. The physical blessing this leper received was a gift, but the greater gifts cannot be seen with the eyes. This leper returned to Jesus, for in Jesus he had the best gift of all--pardon for his sins, and a place in heaven forever.

I suppose it would be accurate for us to say that most people resemble the nine lepers. They take the gifts God gives them, but never find their way to Jesus. Yet, it doesn't take faith to accept physical

blessings. Everyone does this. It does take faith to kneel at Jesus' feet and worship Him, as the leper did, as his God and Lord, his Savior from sin, death, and hell. And so we don't need a large place for worship here, because it's not the nine, but only the one who comes to fall before the feet of Jesus.

But if you are that one, then you are just as blessed as the Samaritan was. You don't have leprosy, but yet you have your own burdens to bear. You live in the same dying world that the Samaritan leper lived in. You deal with sorrow, just as he did. You have those who shun you, as he had. And you have a heart that is as full of sin as his was. You need Jesus every bit as much as he needed Him.

All of you have been blessed with physical gifts of God, but the greater gifts are given through the hearing of His living words. You have found your way to Jesus. As with the Samaritan who returned, your physical blessings are not what you treasure most. You are here at Jesus' feet, as he was, because Jesus is the best gift of all. He accepts you fully and completely, just as He accepted the leper. Jesus does not turn His face away from your sinful life. He has words of forgiveness, and these words are for you. Dear sinner, your God went to the cross on your behalf. He took your failures, your rejection, your guilt and punishment, He took your sins--all of them. You are forgiven. Not if you go out and do something, or live in such a way. You are forgiven fully and completely because your God took your place in hell. He died for you. For you, my friends, for you who do not always live as you should. For you who do not always seek Jesus first. For you, Jesus bled and died. God forgives you.

Now after the Wise Men worshiped at Jesus' feet, it says that they arose and traveled back to their homes. After the Samaritan leper worshiped at the feet of Jesus, he also went on his way, for Jesus told him to rise and go his way, for his faith had made him well. This is where the story ends for us with both the Wise Men and the Samaritan. We hear nothing more about them. Your story, however, is not yet over. You are here at Jesus' feet. You, too, can now rise and go your way. With sins forgiven, you can depart in peace. But where will your way take you? Can you, who have known the richness of God's mercy in Christ, lead a life away from Him? Can you, who knelt down with the one leper, live now like the other nine? Faith always seeks Jesus first. May God grant you, through His Word, that faith, so that your way today, tomorrow, and forever, is the way, the road, the path of life--real life--in Christ Jesus. Amen.