

The rules for lepers were strict. More so than the rules for Covid. A leper had to keep his distance from anyone who was not also a leper. Not because he was contagious. Because he was unclean. There was a seven-day quarantine for anyone who touched a dead body. The leper carried death with him continuously, for with leprosy, various parts of the flesh die and rot away. And so, the leper was always unclean. If anyone came near to him, he had to ring a bell and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!"

And thus, these ten lepers stand at a distance when Jesus draws near. Yet instead of crying, "Unclean!" they cry, "*Have mercy on us!*"

This story grabs our attention. Perhaps because we hear it every Thanksgiving holiday. But even more because of the one leper who returned to Jesus. We do not see this taking place with Jesus' miracles of healing throughout the Gospels. Rarely are we told about someone who, after being healed, offered their thanks and praise to Jesus. This is not to say that they were ungrateful. Nor are we to believe that the nine lepers were not thankful. Yet they did not take the time and effort to return to Jesus. Only the one came back.

And so, not the nine, but the one is the example for us. In how we live as Christians, yes. And also in how we worship. When the Sunday morning Divine Service begins, we gather like lepers here in this place. We are unclean, for we carry death with us wherever we go.

"*The day you eat of it, you will surely die,*" said God. You and I carry death with us because we share in the sinful disobedience of Adam and Eve. When the church bell rings, it can remind us, who gather here, of the bell and cry of the leper, "Unclean! Unclean!"

And this would be our cry, except that it is Jesus who draws near to us in the Divine Service. And so, our cry is not "Unclean! Keep away from!" but "Have mercy on us. Draw near to us and forgive us, Lord, for we are sinful and unclean."

And He does. It was the word and command of Jesus that healed all ten of the lepers. It is that very word and command of Jesus that heals you of your sin. By the command of Jesus, your pastor declares to you, "I forgive you all of your sins." And you are forgiven. You are clean, washed clean in the water of Holy Baptism. Your sin still clings to you, but God declares you to be clean, and so you are.

No sin of yours can now separate you from God. For all your sin is forgiven. This is because Jesus Himself became unclean for you. He bore your sin on the cross. He carried your death in His own body. And so you, my friend, are given life. A new life in Jesus Christ.

The ten lepers were given new life. And the one returned. For him, to live the new life he was given meant coming back to Jesus and falling down before Him.

And so with us. We are here as that one leper. Cleansed of our sin, forgiven, renewed, and made whole again. It is Jesus who has done this for us. And to Jesus we give all thanks and praise. Amen.