

October 10, 2010

Luke 17: 11-19 Lord, Have Mercy!

11 On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' ¹⁹Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

This morning's reading from the Gospel according to Luke tells us that Jesus and his disciples were in the area between Galilee and Samaria. Galilee was where Jesus had grown up, and Samaria was south of Galilee, between Galilee and Jerusalem.

As Luke tells it, Jesus and the disciples had set out on the road to Jerusalem back in Chapter 5 and they are taking a really long time to get to Jerusalem. It hasn't been a straight, uninterrupted journey. A lot has happened along the way.

Twelve chapters later they are still just on the northern edge of Samaria somehow, taking their time, meeting and teaching and healing the people----

People who were not only Jews, but Samaritans.

Samaria, in Jesus' day, was a place where most Jews never, ever went. To go from Galilee to Jerusalem, most Jews would go miles and miles out of their way to go around and not through Samaria. It would be kind of like going to LA without going through Orange County, maybe even avoiding Temecula as well!

The Jews did not like Samaritans at all. This animosity had started generations before, when the Jews came back from exile in Babylon. When they got back, they found that "other" people had moved in to the area, people who were not Jews. And some of the Jews then intermarried with them, creating this people called Samaritans.

Half-Jewish and half-gentile, they were rejected by the Jews as inferior, impure people. Samaritans worshiped on their holy mountain, not in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews thought this was heresy, that the Samaritans were an unclean people.

Jesus and the disciples were ignoring the dictates of society by even going into this area where most Jews never went. It was taking a chance of becoming contaminated, of becoming unclean and losing their righteousness, to even come near “those people!”

Once again, Jesus was turning society’s rules inside out, living out God’s love instead of living the way that the culture told him he should.

In today's passage, Jesus is coming near to a village. Just before he reaches it, ten men approach him. He doesn't ignore them and hurry on his way. Luke tells us that "He saw them."

He saw them and he recognized that they were lepers, contagious and unclean. Even though they respectfully kept their distance, anyone else would have hurried away, afraid of catching leprosy.

But not Jesus. He saw them. He heard them. He stopped and responded.

They cried out, "Jesus, Master, Have mercy on us!"

And he healed them of their leprosy, but not immediately. He told them to go to the priest, who could declare them clean and then they could resume their place in society. But scripture tells us that they were not healed as soon as Jesus spoke. It says that “AS THEY WENT,” they were healed.

As they obeyed Jesus and headed down the road to find a priest, their leprosy disappeared.

Only one of the 10 men looked at himself as he went and saw that he was cured, then turned around and came back to Jesus, praising God with a loud voice and throwing himself down at Jesus' feet and thanking him!

Only one of the men, one of the ten, was grateful enough to turn around and go back to Jesus.

The rest, well, maybe they didn't realize the leprosy was gone until they were too far away, and when they came back, Jesus had moved on. Or maybe they were so anxious to go back to their families that they meant to say thank you later and never quite got around to it.

Or maybe they thought of Jesus as a kind of servant---ask and it shall be given you and it's only what you deserve, because after all, you asked! Isn't that the promise of God? There isn't any requirement in there to be grateful, is there?

And in a way, there isn't. Because the nine who failed to express their gratitude were still cured of leprosy. All ten of them were healed as they went on their way!

They had asked for mercy and Jesus showed them mercy.

Ask and you shall receive.

So what does this have to do with any of us? I don't think anyone here has leprosy, and even if we did, we would go to a doctor, not to Jesus. There is a medical cure for that now.

But what about things that there is no cure for? There are still diseases that medical science can't eradicate. There are still injuries that are fatal.

There are mental illnesses that hold people in their grasp---
--bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, delusions, and
others.

Sometimes these and other mental illnesses lead to destruction and violence. People with these illnesses can be arsonists, sex offenders, murderers, suicides. When mental illness results in such horrible, violent, destructive actions---well, I think it's the closest thing I can believe in as being demon possession----

when people are so possessed by their illness that they do things that are evil and ugly, beyond what we can imagine is normal and human.

Possessed by such an illness, or else knowing someone possessed by such an illness, we may cry out, "Lord, have mercy!"

When we hear that more than 14% of people in this country live in poverty, and that the statistics regarding poverty world-wide are far more appalling than that, and we know that there is no way we can help everyone, don't we cry out in our hearts, "Lord, have mercy!"

When we hear on the news day after day after day about floods, earthquakes, fires, mudslides, hurricanes, lightning strikes, droughts, famines, deadly cold snaps and killer heat waves, and on and on, how can we keep from crying out, "Lord, have mercy!"?

When our children kill each other and themselves, "Lord, have mercy!"

When people are unable to find jobs for more than a year and when people are losing their homes to foreclosure, “Lord, have mercy!”

When children are kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and killed, “Lord, have mercy!”

When our world seems to be drowning in pollution and species are going extinct, “Lord, have mercy!”

When we are tired and worn out from caring for aging parents and children and each other, when spouses need more care than we can manage, when families are divided and relationships are torn, “Lord, have mercy!”

When we are overwhelmed with grief or anxiety or loneliness, “Lord, have mercy!”

When we just cannot understand what is going on around us, when friends betray us and family deserts us, “Lord, have mercy!”

So many times in our lives we need to cry out to Jesus, “Lord, have mercy!” So many reasons! When we are helpless, when we are losing hope, when we just want to run away from it all, “Lord, have mercy!”

And Jesus will stop and see us and hear our cries for mercy. And he will respond. And as we go on our way, having admitted our need of Christ’s mercy, having heard his words and obediently gone on with our lives, following him and trusting in the goodness of God, we will be healed!

Christ, in mercy, sends us on and we will be healed as we go.

Ann La Mott has written a number of popular books, including *Traveling Mercies*, *Bird by Bird*, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*, and *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. She has written that if you only ever prayed two prayers, it would be enough. Those prayers are “Help me, help me, help me” in the morning when you wake up, and “Thank you, thank you, thank you” in the evening before you go to bed.

It is important to return to Christ to say thank you. Even though our cries for mercy are heard and answered without the thank yous, there are some important words we cannot ignore in this story.

Those words are “He turned back.” “He turned back”.

When we define the word “repent” very literally, we find that it means “to turn again”---to “turn back.”

The nine men who failed to turn back to say thank you to Jesus did not turn back. They did not repent. They missed out on something very important.

A relationship with Jesus Christ. A relationship that is built on faith. Jesus tells the grateful man, “Your faith has made you well.”

Why would he say this? The man was already cured of leprosy! If he hadn't been, why was he grateful? The ungrateful men were also cured of leprosy. We know this because scripture tells us that as they went, they were made clean.

So what does Jesus mean, "Your faith has made you well."?

The word "well" must mean more than just cured, or if not more, then something different!

So let me propose a definition for "well" as it's used in this story.

I think the word “well” in this context means something more like “whole”, something more holistic, more all-encompassing than just a physical healing.

I think it means a spiritual healing, that something has been restored that is far more than skin-deep, if you would excuse the pun!

In turning back and saying thank you to Jesus, the Samaritan acknowledged him as the source of healing, admitted that without Jesus the healing would not have happened.

And this is what we can do as well.

When we cry out, “Lord, have mercy!” we are admitting our need of God. When things get better, when the circumstances that lead us to cry for mercy ease up and we can find reason for joy and hope once again, do we stop and say thank you?

Or do we just go on our way, healed on the surface but still with deep wounds deep inside?

Do we turn back in faith and gratitude and allow Jesus to make us well, inside and out, whole and spiritually healed?

Saying thank you is not just for the sake of Jesus' happiness and good feelings.

Saying thank you is so that we can be made completely well.

The Good News of this passage, the grace found in these words is this----

When we cry out in pain and despair and confusion and desperation,

When we are at the end of our rope and don't know where else to turn,

When we cry out "Lord, Have mercy!"

Christ sees us. He hears us. He responds to us. And we are healed. God will work to bring something good out of our terrible situation. God will work through us and others to change the situation for us and for others who are crying for mercy.

And if we remember to give God praise and thanks, then we will be taking one step closer to wholeness, to being well. We will move along on our journey to God, every day another step closer to being the people we were created to be----

People who know that we depend on God for everything we have, everything we are, every way that we are loved, and for every breath we take.

For every time we say “Lord, have mercy!” or “Help me, help me, help me” let’s not forget to turn back to Christ and say “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” In those words we will find wholeness and our spirits will be made well.

Amen.