

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 9, 2022

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

on

Luke 17:11-19

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Ten Lepers made Whole

In the time of Jesus' ministry, there were all kinds of ailments and diseases, as there are today. And we might meditate on what it might be like to live in a time without anything quite like hospitals or doctors, as we know them. Now there were highly developed traditions of all sorts of healing remedies in both the Greek and Jewish worlds, mostly comprised of medicinal herbs. In the talmudic literature, more than 70 plants were relied upon for cures, many that would be familiar to us, like cumin, beets, olives, dates, certain ferns. I'm sure that their crafts were serviceable for many purposes, and I imagine that they were highly trusted, but, still, you could only do so much with the plants they had, nothing like the potency of modern pharmaceuticals.

It really would have been quite dreadful, the looming threat of illness, not only because of the bodily suffering that would be yours to bear, but also, in certain cases, an ailment would serve as a sign of your sin and begin a chain of events that would lead to an ostracism that would become, in effect, a kind of social murder. Because of the all consuming danger of certain ailments in those days, you would have been very mindful of every inch of your skin. You would've been checking yourself, checking your children. You would've been scrutinizing others, others would be scrutinizing you. For it would've been quite serious if you were to wake up one morning with, say, a flaky and itchy patch of skin, a slight case of eczema, for us. But in those days, it would have fallen under an umbrella of afflictions, *zara'at*, traditionally rendered "leprosy."

The Greek word, *lepra*, covered a wide range of diseases that produced scales, perhaps psoriasis, or all sorts of fungal infections. It could include true leprosy, what we call Hansen's disease, but it is definitely not limited to it. All the times that *zara'at* appears in the Hebrew scriptures, you don't see the necrosis associated with Hansen's disease.

Most every culture of the time attributed leprosy to either some kind of black magic or the sufferer's sin. In the Hebrew Bible you see the nuance of leprosy befalling those who challenge those given authority by God. There is an account of the servant, Gehazi, getting leprosy after disobeying the will of his master, the prophet Elisha. In the Torah, Miriam came down with leprosy after questioning the authority of her brother, Moses. Her "snow-white scales" disappeared after a seven day quarantine. There is an especially dramatic case of leprosy that became the downfall of the long serving and strong King Uzziah of Judah. Matthew lists him in Jesus' genealogy. He was so bold that he took it upon himself to walk right to the altar to burn incense in the temple as only the priests could. Before he could do so, eighty priests stormed the inner sanctum of the temple to stop him, and the King stood before them, with censer in his defiant hands at the ready to pray as both priest and king. But before he can do that, King Uzziah is afflicted with leprosy, in an instant. His play for priestly authority is crushed. He is cast out of the temple, and forced to quarantine until his death, one

of grief and anxiety 11 years later. His son, Jotham, who had ruled in his stead, had him buried in a solitary grave, outside of the official necropolis, an everlasting quarantine, and a testament to the consequences of interfering with the unfolding purposes of God.

So to be a leper was to be readily associated with not just any sin, but, especially the sin of defiance toward God's prophets and priests. I'm sure that every leper would have been scrutinized both inside and out for flaws or anything suspicious. I'm sure that every rebellious type would have had his skin scrutinized for confirmation of his status as threat. And I am certain that Jesus must have had very good skin, because he wouldn't have made it anywhere near villages, let alone Jerusalem and the temple, if there had been a blemish upon him.

To make this scrutiny even more intense, it was the priests' job to inspect a new leper over a course of weeks, to judge their purity or impurity. And the tradition was that they would only pray for you *after* you were healed. You, as a leper, had to pray to God on your own behalf, and hope that you would be heard. If the priest's inspection revealed clean skin, only then would the priests sacrifice on your behalf, presiding over a multi-day process of cleansing and purifying rituals that is too ornate for me to get into here. But day by day, with the priest's oversight, you would've been ritually given access to your home city or village, then your own house, and then the Temple in Jerusalem. It is reported that in the courtyard of the Temple itself, in the northwest, there was the Chamber of the Lepers where the lepers remained after they had been cured, and where they bathed on the eighth day of their purification, awaiting their admittance for the anointing of their toes with the blood of the sacrifice. This is what happened if everything went right.

Now the Ten Lepers that Jesus encountered in the shadow-region between Samaria and Galilee would have been blood-curdling examples what happened if everything went wrong. If the leprosy did not go away, it would have meant permanent banishment from civilization as they knew it. Everyone else would be sure not to get closer than 100 cubits, and be sure not to anywhere downwind from you. The historian, Josephus, who was both a priest and lived during the time of the Second Temple wrote that it was forbidden for the leper to "come into the city at all [or] to live with any others, as if they were in effect dead persons."

And so, Jesus and his disciples essentially met ten dead men on the path between Samaria and Galilee. Each one of them would have died forever to the world, one horrible day in their lives. Fathers, Grandfathers, Sons. Devoted members of their families and communities, excised, cast out, and transmogrified into the walking dead. Who knows what they had to do to survive? What desperate measures had they taken to make it this far? One sign of their desperation is that there is a Samaritan among their company. That ancient grudge seems to have died, too. Despite their scorn, he was a full-fledged part of their ad hoc family of the dead, but he likely would have been the runt of the litter, the lowest among the lowest.

Note how in this encounter in Luke's Gospel these ten lepers keep their distance from Jesus' company, and vice versa, as was the rule. They are still a great threat, both in terms of disease and association. They would have represented, remember, not only sickness, and death, but also great sin, the sin of defiance towards God and God's agents. And so, at such a distance, they had to lift up their voices for Jesus to hear them. And what did they ask? A cry of utter need out of desolation "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

They would have heard that he was a healer, and they, as a group, put their trust in him.

In response, Jesus tells them "Go, shew yourselves unto the priests." He's asking them to go to Jerusalem, to meet with the priests, and to be, hopefully, determined clean, and released from their pitiful exile. They don't scoff at this far-fetched hope, they are obedient, and turn their face towards Jerusalem. And, wonder of wonders, as they made their way to the priests there, they look closely upon their skin to discover that they are all healed. Freed from their pain, freed from their sins, and freed from a living death. Can you imagine the stir that this group of lepers would have caused back at the Temple? It would have been not

only an unprecedented and sensational event to witness, but also would have been a challenge to the priest's authority, showing their judgment to have profoundly missed the mark.

With all this context, we get a vivid sense of how powerful it was that Jesus was interested in the welfare of lepers, he taught his apostles to help them, too. And that their healing them would have made some overwhelmingly happy, and some overwhelmingly disturbed, because he did not go through the proper channels.

But, in the encounter we are looking at today, only nine of the healer lepers went back to the Temple, only nine, the Judeans, returned to the people that cast them out. It is the tenth, the Samaritan, that does something astonishing. Instead of going to Jerusalem, which would have had no place for him, in fact, he was still dead to them, despite his healing, instead of going to the priests there, the former leper glorifies God with a loud voice and falls to the dust at Jesus' feet in overwhelming gratitude. Could it be that, in this way, the Samaritan is still following Jesus' direction to show himself unto the priests. It seems that he is looking to Jesus to determine whether he is clean or not. Is Jesus now priest to him?

Well, whatever the character of his devotion, Jesus notes that he is the only one who returned in thanksgiving and declares him whole, much like a priest would have done. And scandalously he says that his faith has made him whole. Yes, he declares that a Samaritan has faith, and a real flesh and blood Samaritan, not just one in a parable. And that this Samaritan receives a blessing that the others miss out on, eager to return to their old lives. The Samaritan arises from death of being both a leper *and* a Samaritan to a new life in Christ, the one that spurred his healing into being.

And now, all these many years later, we find in him a sterling example of faith, unexpected for his time, the cream of the leprous crop, with faith enough to not only heal himself, but to reach our ears and the eyes of our hearts, so that we might know the depths of healing that Christ draws us toward when we encounter him, the lengths to which Christ is willing to turn the social order inside out to make a path for healing and grace, so that we, in our sickness, and death, and sin, might hear in our day, "Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole."