

Sermon Healing and Giving Thanks
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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SCRIPTURE

Luke 17: 11-19

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.'

Sermon Healing and Giving Thanks

In this morning's scripture reading we hear that Jesus was approached by ten lepers. We did not hear that Jesus was approached by ten men with leprosy. No. Persons with leprosy were usually called lepers. They were identified by their medical condition. One could see their skin lesions, their scars and the tattered clothing. They were lepers. It's like they lost their identity as persons and became their condition.

Lepers were not allowed to be in the community because leprosy was contagious and they were considered unclean. The book of Leviticus detailed how the priest would declare that a person had leprosy, how the priest could pronounce them healed – and how lepers were to live. *"The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.'* 46*He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."* (Leviticus 13: 45-46)

Lepers were outcasts. They couldn't have jobs. They had to rely on clothing and food that people tossed their way. People with leprosy did not have an easy lot.

The ten lepers who approached Jesus called to him from a distance. They approached Jesus, keeping the prescribed distance. And Jesus kept that distance too. He did not lay his hands on them or touch them. He did not spit onto the dirt and wipe it on their wound to cure them of their leprosy. He had done that with a blind man, applied mud to his eyes. No. Jesus told those ten lepers to go show themselves to the priests. The priests were the ones, under Jewish law, who would determine whether a person that had leprosy was healed of it. If the priest concluded that the person no longer had the disease, the priest would actually sign a certificate to document that the person did not have leprosy. The priest would confirm if a person were

healed, that they were no longer infected. It was the necessary step for a person healed of leprosy to re-enter society.

In this morning's reading we also hear that one of these men was a Samaritan. As you know, Samaritans and Jews did not get along. So this Samaritan man would not have been accepted into Jewish society. But, apparently, when gripped with leprosy, that boundary, that wall between Samaritan and Jew was lowered as the Jewish lepers and the Samaritan leper were traveling together.

Had these men come to some sort of agreement? Did they agree to overlook what had caused that age old division? We don't know the history of these men, but these ten men approached Jesus together asking for mercy.

And Jesus heard them. Jesus did not pass them by. Jesus did not ignore their pleas for help, even though these lepers would have been relegated to a life of begging outside the city gates.

No. Jesus heard them and told them to present themselves to the priest. He told them to follow the rules and present themselves to the priest. And somewhere along that road between Samaria and Galilee the ten lepers were made clean. They were healed. We don't know how long it took or how far they had walked. All we know is that at some point they looked at themselves and realized their disease was gone. Perhaps they looked at their own hands and arms. Perhaps they noticed that the sores on another person had disappeared. However they came to realize this miracle, they realized they were healed. Healed.

It was amazing.

Now I have a few words to say about healing. In a way it's a side note to this story, but it also applies. Healing is not always the same as being cured. Healing can be physical or emotional, within persons or within families. Healing can happen even when cure is not possible. And sometimes healing happens even when we are not aware of it.

As a hospice nurse, I witnessed healing when there was not cure. I have seen relationships that were broken, get mended as an individual was approaching death. While the body was dying, the relationship was healed.

I witnessed a young man with AIDS plan his funeral. He chose the scripture and hymns. He planned each detail of his service. He even arranged to have his mother and sisters receive roses. Funerals can contribute to the healing process.

And one of my patients, a woman in her 50s, was baptized before she died. She was a sweet woman, intelligent, giving, caring and appreciative of anything that was done for her. She had been a prostitute. As she approached death, she wanted to closer relationship with her loving God. So the hospice chaplain called a local priest who met with her, taught her about Jesus, and baptized her as she was getting close to death. Her relationship with God had been healed.

These examples of healing did not happen in an instant, they may not have even felt like healing in those moments, in the midst of the intense emotions. And the individuals or family

members might not have recognized this healing until afterward when they reflected on their experiences. But there was healing. And there was gratitude - gratitude for time with the person who was dying, for healing of the relationship with a loved one, or for the restored relationship with God.

On September 12, 2016, 15 years after 9/11, I helped plan a prayer for peace service at Marquand chapel at Yale Divinity School. It included readings from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. It included a story about two florists from South Africa who had arrived in LaGuardia on Sept 11, 2001 with over two thousand roses for an international flower show. That show was cancelled because of the horrific events of that day. But these women used their roses to create a beautiful display of the twin towers – in roses at Union Square. They wanted to create something beautiful as a sign of solidarity with those who had lost their lives in the towers.

We, at the chapel, invited those present to sprinkle rose petals on a flag of the earth seen from outer space as we prayed for peace. It was a very moving service. Afterward, I received an email from a student who had lost friends in one of the twin towers when it collapsed. He told me the service was healing for him. And he was grateful. Healing can happen even after many years have passed.

Healing and gratitude are powerful. They go together. Jesus knew this. He apparently expected all ten individuals who were cured to return to say thank you. Otherwise he would not have asked the Samaritan, or maybe he was addressing the Samaritan but asking all who could hear, where the other nine were.

That the Samaritan, the only one who returned to Jesus, no longer stood at a distance. He could come close to Jesus now. He was no longer a leper. He was cured. He was healed and he was grateful.

Overwhelmed with gratitude for being cured of his leprosy, the Samaritan threw himself on the ground in front of Jesus and thanked him. He did not simply say “Thank you, Jesus.” or reach out his hand to shake Jesus’ hand as he thanked him. Exuberant with joy, he threw himself down, his face looking down at the ground and then up at Jesus, this man displayed unbridled gratitude.

The other nine lepers presumably continued on to the temple so that the priest could certify that they were clean. That’s what their faith required of them. That’s what Jesus told them to do. They were following directions. Soon they would be able to rejoin society. They would be able to go home to their families, their friends, their neighbors; as soon as they had that piece of paper. They were doing exactly what Jesus told them to do, they were doing exactly what their faith and society told them they had to do. They followed the rules and went to the priest.

But the Samaritan, that Samaritan returned to Jesus. He dropped to the ground and gave thanks and praise to Jesus. Jesus told him that his faith had saved him.

The Samaritan's faith in this Jewish rabbi had saved him. Jesus' original instructions to that group would not have been easy for that Samaritan to follow – a non-Jew presenting himself to a Jewish priest. But he had great faith in Jesus, such faith that he was willing to do the unimaginable. Once he was healed, rather than follow the normal protocol, rather than follow some rules, rather than rush home to his family - from whom he had been separated from by his leprosy – this Samaritan returned to Jesus. He returned to give thanks. Full of gratitude, overwhelmed with joy, he threw himself on the ground at Jesus' feet. No longer did he have to keep a distance. He got close to Jesus and loudly, unashamedly gave him thanks and praise.

In this passage, Luke reminds his listeners, Luke reminds us that this man was a Samaritan. Jesus asked the whereabouts of the other nine, he reminds those traveling that road with him, that this man was a foreigner. Jesus made it a point to remind people of this man was an outcast from the perspective of Jewish society.

This Samaritan could return home a healed man. I imagine that he continued to tell others about this miracle long after he walked away. I can imagine such a scene.

But I wonder. Would this Samaritan be welcomed into Jewish society along with the other nine healed lepers? Would this Samaritan still be considered an outcast in Jewish society? He was cured of his leprosy. He was still a Samaritan. He would not be healed from the prejudice which separated him from Jewish society.

We don't know if the other nine lepers who had been cured of their leprosy would have accepted him. Would they have welcomed him into their families? Would the others who were healed welcome this man into their communities when they were no longer outcasts together? Would those who witnessed this healing by Jesus welcome this man into their communities, their homes?

We can ask similar questions. Would we welcome outsiders into our neighborhood? Would we welcome refugees from war torn countries like Ukraine or Syria or immigrants from Ecuador or Nicaragua whose families had been torn apart by violence and were living in constant fear? Or would we bus them as far away as possible? Would we welcome half way houses for individuals recovering from addiction into our communities?

A number of years ago, a private corporation wanted to put a health care facility for chronically ill and terminally ill individuals serving prison sentences in my town – a nursing home. These individuals were seriously ill. Some were wheelchair bound. Some were dying. Their health care needs could not be met by prison health care system. There was facility which had been a nursing home that closed and was empty. The corporation wanted to use this building. Security measures would be added.

But there was fear on the part of some. There was concern about property values by some. There were hearings, letters to the editor, and petitions were brought around neighborhoods by individuals to try to prevent this from happening. People gained support of local and state representatives. The corporation was taken to court to try to prevent that facility from being used for these prisoners, for these patients, these people. These chronically ill or dying

patients were still criminals in the minds of many. Their identity as criminals seemed to overshadow their identity as people. People with significant health care needs. People who were dying.

When I called my state representative to support the use of this facility for these people, I was told that I was the only person who had called in favor of this. When I wrote a letter to the editor that was published in the local paper, someone at church approached me to say that she had never thought of the situation as I had described it.

Jesus saw the Samaritan with leprosy as a person. Jesus healed him. Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion, a military officer in an occupying army. Jesus saw the criminal who was crucified next to him as a person in need of forgiveness and forgave him. Jesus healed these people. Jesus healed people, regardless of who they were, what group they belonged to, or what they had done. Jesus healed them and heals us.

We are called to follow in the way of Jesus – to see people as people and not their label. We are called to do what we can to support them. Jesus calls us to put aside that which divides us so we can help others to heal – whoever they are, whatever their circumstances. We never know when we can help another person heal or when we will be healed ourselves.

Jesus asked the Samaritan who had been healed of his leprosy, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” When we experience healing- from physical or emotional conditions, from broken relationships, from that which separates from God, we are called to be grateful. We are called to give thanks to God.

Maya Angelou once said, "Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good."

In our gratitude for the small and large healings that we have been a part of, may we be grateful. And in faith and gratitude, may we do what we can to help others to heal. And for the opportunity of that blessing, let us also give thanks.