

“Praising God; Giving Thanks”
October 14, 2007

Text:
Luke 17:11-19

The event could have happened in any town, really....it could have happened in Dallas!
A group of people seeking healing and wholeness:

An AA meeting; a business gathering; a group of teenagers seeking belonging; several lonely homemakers glued to Oprah; Alzheimers patients at the local nursing home; or 6 year old boys being terrorized by a neighborhood bully.

In our Gospel text for this morning, Luke tells us about 10 lepers. They were desperate people, because they had that most dreaded disease of the ancient world. Leprosy was painful, disfiguring, disgusting, and frequently fatal. It was a disease that made them outcasts.....they had to wear bells around their necks and yell, “Unclean” whenever they came into a crowd...

Luke tells of ten lepers who met up with Jesus one day in a dried up little Samaritan village. Luke tells the detail that although 10 were cleansed of their leprosy, sadly only one was made whole. None of us has leprosy, but few, if any of us are not in dire need of healing and wholeness in some aspect of our lives. In fact, I don't know anyone who is completely whole; totally well! All of us are in one way or another searching for some type of healing and redemption. From the AIDS patient who is in desperate search of a vaccine to the anxiety ridden business man in search of peace and stability, to the rejected teenager in search of companionship, to the angry spouse in search of joy and harmony. Whatever it is, all of us have disease. Our gospel text is a little vignette of our search for healing and wholeness....therefore, I'd like to invite you to look with me at the story and see what we might learn from it about our own pilgrimage.

I. God is Close

The first thing that leaps out in the story is that the ten lepers stood at a distance...they stood afar off. Isn't that how many in our world view God, that he is unapproachable and distant, just some vague mist or cloud somewhere who has no real concern for human pain. Many look at their disease, at their uncleanness, at the lack of perfection and assume that God must be disgusted and turned off by the problems and illness in the world...or if he is not turned off and distant, then surely he will punish me for my lack of wholeness and my neglect of health. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The Lord Jesus Christ is eminently available to us. He does not demand perfection before we may approach him. Again and again, the Gospels record the sensitivity of Jesus to need, to pain, to illness, to brokenness, to loneliness.

It is precisely to those conditions of human agony that the Lord was most receptive and most compassionate.

If only we would perceive God this way. If only we could be forever aware of this divine readiness to hear us, to heal us, to comfort, to restore our health.

If we want health and wholeness, one thing is certain-if we stand at a distance-if we do not approach Jesus-then there is no way to avail ourselves of the healing power of his presence. Healing begins with our approaching Jesus! Something happened to the lepers, maybe it was their desperation, and maybe it was the way Jesus communicated with them. Whatever it was, they were emboldened to approach him, to draw near to him.

II. Have Mercy on Us

Notice carefully what they said when they approached Jesus:

They didn't explain their illness;
They didn't try to justify themselves;
They didn't make excuses for their condition;
They didn't even apologize for being unclean.

Their plea was wrenched from the depths of their being:

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

It is the prayer of prayers-the universal cry...the timeless plea of humanity. This prayer is echoed in the Eucharistic Rite every time we say or sing the Kerie:

“Lord, have mercy upon us;
Christ, have mercy upon us;
Lord, have mercy upon us.”

The Jesus Prayer speaks of this plea as well: “Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.”

In my lostness...in my pain...in my disease...in my loneliness...
Jesus have mercy...and he did!...and he does! Healing involves our asking Christ to come into our broken lives with his mercy.

III. The Need for Action

Jesus responds to their plea. He said there's something you need to do, there's an action you need to take. “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” This is a reference to the tradition which stated that the Aaronic Priesthood had to determine if one had been healed from leprosy and to certify cleanliness. It was within this context that Jesus directed them to go and show themselves to

the priests. Not because they were sources of healing, but because they were human agents in God's process of healing and redemption.

We have to do likewise...we have to make use of the human agents and vehicles and resources which God makes available to us and through whom God heals and reconciles.

“Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Might mean:

- Go to an alcoholic treatment center;
- Go to a therapist for counseling;
- Go to your enemy for reconciliation;
- Go to your spouse for forgiveness;
- Go to your parents for comfort and direction;
- Go to your priest for confession;
- Go to your doctor for treatment;
- Go to your prayer group for intercession.

In 1982, I was invited to preach at an African American Baptist Church in North Florida. The Reverend William Smith, was a good friend and the senior pastor. As I began to preach that morning, I noticed that the organist began to play quietly. I thought it was the local parish custom and kept on preaching. Then the choir began to hum...I kept on. When the congregation and choir began to sing and sway, I decided that I needed to sit down until this wonderful and spontaneous movement of the Spirit was complete. I then rose and concluded my sermon. After the service, I was in the pastor's study and I said that I had enjoyed coming to the Church, but that I was surprised by the music during the sermon. Willie said, “We didn't plan that, but when you began to preach my assistant leaned over to me and said, ‘That boy's gonna need some help!’, so I motioned to the choir.”

Jesus received help! God help us to receive it, too!

Healing involves some action...it requires us to take some responsibility for our sickness and for healing. Not substituting God's power of healing, but assisting in it. As the lepers went, they were cleansed.

IV Giving Thanks

Then Luke describes the last phase in healing and redemption!

.....“ten were cleansed, he said. But only one was healed...”

Ten got over the leprosy, but only one was made whole! Why? Because only one turned back.....“Praising God with a loud voice, and falling on his face at Jesus feet, giving Him thanks.” That's the final act of healing.

In 1945, when Gestapo boots were pounding the pavement outside of his cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood in the face of the evils of Hitler and Nazism. He

wondered on paper what kind of people the church and the world were going to need in the decades ahead. He said this: “What the world will need in the future is not merely people of genius, not just brilliant tacticians and wise managers, but committed, straight forward, honest, moral and God-centered men and women who live according to praise, thanksgiving and generosity.”

The answers are found in our gospel text.

1. The lepers approached Jesus...
Have you approached Jesus lately?
2. The lepers cried out for help...
Have you made your needs known to God?
3. The lepers showed themselves to the priests
Have you taken action on some aspect of illness...brokenness and sought help?
4. The one leper responded with praise and thanksgiving
Have you thanked God recently for the healing and redemption which has happened?

Today, I am asked to speak of our Annual Giving to the pledging process, and our response. Let me simply and briefly declare that making a pledge is an act of praise and gratitude. A pledge to the mission and ministry of God as it is expressed through this church is an answering love for all of what God has already done in our lives.