

Sermon Ten Lepers

A blind boy was leaning against a wall near a metro stop in Washington D. C. with a hat at his feet, with a sign which read: "I am blind, please help." The hat was almost empty. Begging is pretty commonplace in that area, passers by are used to it and often ignore it and walk by.

A businessman walking by saw the blind boy, dropped a few coins in his hat, then took the sign, turned it around, wrote something on it, put the sign back, so everyone who walked by now saw what he'd written.

The hat soon began to fill up. More people were giving their change and even some notes to the blind boy. Around lunchtime, the man returned to check on the blind boy, who recognized the man's footsteps and asked, "Was it you who changed my sign this morning? What did you write?" The man replied, "I only wrote the truth, I said what you said, only differently. I wrote 'Today is a beautiful day but I can't see it'. The new sign had reminded people that they were blessed to be able to see the beauty of the day, and seeing the blind boy made them think. Giving thanks to God for the blessings we have in abundance is something all too often neglected in a world where we are inclined to take much for granted. Yet if we remember to count our blessings it attunes us then to become more inclined to be a blessing to those around us. We read in the book of Proverbs: **"One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered."**

Luke tells us in today's gospel that as Jesus begins His final journey toward Jerusalem before His Passion, he encounters ten lepers. Feared and outcast, condemned to live on the outskirts of towns, lepers were required to go to the temple as a sort of public health order where the priests would verify their condition. Lepers and all in contact with them were required to shout "Unclean! Unclean!" for everyone to avoid contact with them.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus alludes to the story of Elisha as we heard in today's OT reading, when he says "there were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha,

and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. These ten in today's gospel story, when they encounter Jesus cry out "**Jesus! Master! Have mercy on us!**" They recognize Him as the source of not only miraculous healing, but of their very salvation. Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests, and on their way all ten find they are cured! Nine hurry to the temple but just one returns to Jesus. And he was a Samaritan. The stories of Naaman and this one share common details, both being foreigners, Naaman being a Syrian the other one a Samaritan and both cured of leprosy. More than that, they are both outsiders to the people of God. Naaman commander of an army that opposes Israel. The Samaritan of a people long hostile to the Jews, the chosen people. Yet God heals each from leprosy, despite their enemy/outsider status, and before they pledge any allegiance to God. Both are healed from afar without being touched. Previous stories have Jesus touching the sick to cure them, but now the point of today's story is entirely on the *outcome* of the healing.

We remember the relationship between Samaritans and Jews in Jesus' time was conflicted and sometimes violent. Tribal tensions often escalated into hostilities, so that when in his journeying Jesus was refused hospitality in a Samaritan village, James and John angrily asked Jesus "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" which Jesus firmly rebukes (Luke 9:51-56)..

And now the one out of the ten cleansed who is a Samaritan falls on his face before Jesus, praising God with a loud voice in profound gratitude. And Jesus looks at him and says "**Weren't ten healed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to give praise to God except this foreigner?**" It happened that the temple in Jerusalem forbade foreigners entering, and had the Samaritan gone to see the priest as Jesus commanded him to do, he would have been denied admittance. Instead, after his healing, he returns to the source of all spiritual healing.

And Jesus' says to the Samaritan prostrate with thanksgiving at his feet: "***your faith has made you well***" Remember he said this too to the woman who touched the hem of His garment and was healed, and the blind beggar. ***You are healed through your faith.***

The Samaritan's thanksgiving falling at Jesus' feet; his recognition that God is at work when Jesus notices and heals hurts and brokenness; his understanding that to thank Jesus is to glorify

God: this seems to come easiest to people who have received most from Jesus, especially the marginalized and discounted in society. Jesus said those who have been given much also love greatly, because love that springs from gratitude is the essence of faith. It's likely that the one who thanked Jesus because he was doubly marginalized, was doubly grateful. What do we need to learn from Jesus' teaching on this? About thankfulness to God being something we need to practice better?

Surely Jesus requires us who are fortunate to notice and care for people who live on the margins of our communities. And just as there are many of those, maybe also there are parts of us that are unlovely and need to be healed or restored, and submitting them to Jesus in faith will bring us to be rescued from them. We can be assured that we will receive God's mercy, love and forgiveness for any such acts of faith.

In our lives of bountiful privilege surely we also need to be properly thankful for the many blessings we might assume we are entitled to, deserve and take for granted, and also we need to pray to provide blessings to others. That we might be used in ways to benefit those who may be in need, not knowing how the smallest, simplest of gestures may be used by the Holy Spirit.

So what else do we make of the 9 who didn't return? Why didn't they? Even after getting their lives back miraculously. Did they just want to assume normal life again, without being touched by the significance of the event? Were they embarrassed or unwilling to acknowledge they needed a miraculous intervention? I remember standing anxiously with a large crowd while a man on the point of falling from a great height was rescued by mountain rescue professionals from being stuck on a place no sensible person would have risked climbing onto, and he simply walked away, smirking and embarrassed without thanking the brave men who endangered their lives to save his.

So maybe the 9 didn't return for the kind of excuses we might find familiar in our world today:

- One waited to see if the cure was real
- One waited to see if it would last.
- One thought he might see Jesus sometime later and say something.
- One decided that he had never really had leprosy.

- One said he would have recovered anyway.
- One said he thanked the priests instead.
- One said, Jesus didn't really do anything.
- One said, any rabbi would have done what Jesus did.
- One said, you know what - I was already feeling better.

How diligent are we in our faith reminding ourselves of the many many blessings we receive daily as beloved people of God. And just as our parents instilled in us the need to write thanks you letters after receiving gifts, don't we need to always be mindful of God's blessings in our lives, and our need to be attuned to the needs of others? Let's ask ourselves then, when was the last time you or I threw ourselves at Jesus feet in deepest praise and thankfulness?

Amen