

"One Turned Back"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Peter Lawson

Luke 17:11-19

November 23, 2025

[something to consider is that Jesus performed ministry while he was on the move, traveling from one place to another. He was not anticipating an encounter with a contingent of sick lepers; rather, they prevailed upon him. Much of ministry opportunity occurs when you are on the move and is not in your plan]

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:11-19

I'm trying to picture in my mind this scene which shows Jesus meeting up with these ten lepers as he is traveling to Jerusalem. As Jesus makes the trek to the holy place of his ancestors, the holy city, he meets up with ten lepers. They begin waving their arms at Jesus, "Have mercy upon us."

Certainly, we can understand why they would be wildly waving their arms. These were desperate men. As lepers they were the untouchables of their day. They were considered godless and unclean because of their disease. These men lived outside the city because they weren't welcome in the city. In fact, if a leper would wander into a city or town or village, a citizen of that town had every right to pick up a stone and throw it him. And if it killed him the assailant would bear no consequence. It was thought if you were a leper – which is a skin disease which today can be treated with modern medicine – that all you had to do was touch one such as he and you could become a leper yourself. That's why you had leper colonies, designated areas for these people to live in. That's why the Bible says that even as they cried out to Jesus, they kept their distance. These men had to live a hand to mouth existence, cut off from every vestige of human compassion. Because of their station in life, they were not allowed to partake of even the most basic human privileges.

I wonder if this is how people who were in the throws of the coronavirus felt when the pandemic was at its peak, those lying on hospital beds with ventilators pumping oxygen into their lungs so that they could breathe, and intravenous tubes to provide fluids to keep them alive. And because of the restrictions, they had to suffer this alone. They were the untouchables, as even their closest loved ones are not allowed to reach out touch their hand.

Those ten men dressed in rags waving at Jesus cause us to feel uneasy because there are any number of circumstances in life which could thrust us into that same domain of desperation. There can be any number of ways that life can throw cruel surprises your way, and you to take your place alongside those ten lepers, seeking help. The doctor shows you an x-ray with a strange image on it and begins telling you about treatments in store for you. Oh no. An expectant mother receives word that the child she is carrying has an irregular heartbeat and the future looks shaky at best. "What do I do?" she says. Your employer abruptly and without warning tells you the

company must cut back and your name is on the let go list. Those kinds of moments in life show us just delicate life is and how vulnerable we all are.

So, these men, these ten lepers, hearing that Jesus was a man of compassion and who healed people of their diseases, seek Jesus out and when they find him, cry to him, "Have mercy upon us."

What I find curious is Jesus' reaction. In response to their cries for mercy, in response to their cruel hand life has played on them, he says this: Go and show yourselves to the priests (Luke 17:14). Now, think about that. The priests were those who dwelled in the cities where the houses of worship were. This was the very place where the lepers could not go because they were not wanted there. And if they tried to get into the city to the place where the priests were in danger of having rocks and stones thrown at them or even worse. Even if they somehow managed to sneak through the city gates, and plodded their way to the entrance of the synagogue or the temple where these priests were, they would not be allowed to enter that place of worship because they were, religiously speaking, unclean. A leper was clearly marked by the lesions on his skin. There was no hiding who you were. Jesus was asking them to perform a dangerous act: "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

What I admire about these men is that they did what they were told. They did exactly as Jesus instructs them to do. You have to wonder what was going through their minds as they set their eyes on the city where they knew they were not welcome, knowing they were putting their lives in great danger. And yet often times that's what it means to obey Christ. It means setting your eyes on that place Jesus wants you to go, even as you are fearful about what it means to get there, even when it seems like it makes no sense or don't have a clue on how you are going to do it, but you go anyway. "Go," said Jesus. "And they went."

Jesus is driving home a hard message here, that even in the midst of our hardship, even in the midst of the woes and worries of life, he calls us to obedience. Actually, I find this to be true in my personal faith life. Frequently I will go to God with my arms full of the things I would like him to do for me, and I often don't find him as sympathetic as I would like him to be. I want him to solve my problems and he seems to be saying, "Just because you have problems, doesn't mean you can't do the things I want you to do." So often we come to Jesus with arms filled with worries and burdens. "Can you take these away Jesus?" And the response we get from Jesus is, "Go, serve, do!"

Now this is not the end of the story. As these ten lepers made their journey to the city as they were told to do, step by painful step, they are healed of their disease, that is they were "made clean." In that moment they were transformed from outcasts, cut off from the world, shunned and derided, into fully restored human beings.

Then the Bible says this: "One of them, with an emphasis on only one, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice." He then prostrated

himself, that, is he literally got down on all fours at the feet of Jesus and offered his gratefulness to Jesus. "Were not ten made clean?" asked Jesus. "Where then are the other nine?" And of course this is the question we all ask. After these ten lepers dressed in rags, get their lives back, only one returns to offer thanks to Jesus. Where are the other nine?

Perhaps we should give these guys some slack. They were so elated over what had happened they wanted to get home to their families as soon as they could, to resume life which had been taken from them. So much time had already been lost. Or, maybe since they were now restored as full members of society, they have it in their minds they need to get back to work. There were fields to plow, crops to plant, fish to catch. Perhaps a couple of these nine who were healed thought once they got their lives back in order, and reunited with their families, then they would search Jesus out and thank him for what he had done for them.

Honestly, though, I think it goes deeper than that. These ten lepers demonstrated what it meant to be obedient, which is a critical aspect of discipleship. In the midst of their pain, Jesus said, "Go and show yourselves to the priests," and they went, that is, they obeyed. But there is more to discipleship than obedience. There is more to living the Christian life than saying yes to the directions we are given. Discipleship is about being grateful for what God has done for us. It is the recognition that God has done something abundantly gracious, and then showing that you are abundantly grateful. Only one of those ten lepers grasped that. This is what worship is. Worship is expressing to God our gratefulness for doing more than we could ever deserve no matter how obedient we might be. For those nine lepers who did not return to Jesus and give thanks, it was nothing personal. Jesus gave them a command, they obeyed, and as a reward they were healed. But the one leper who returned thanks it was very personal. He knew that no matter what he did, no matter how well he obeyed, that he could never earn what Jesus did for him. What Jesus gave him was a gift, a wonderful, abundant gracious gift because Jesus decided to be abundantly gracious.

So, we have to ask ourselves, "Do our lives reflect this gratefulness?" The cynical part of me says that just as only one of these lepers out of ten returned thanks and the other nine did not, then probably nine out of ten times I don't return thanks to God in the way I should. The Christian life must be a grateful life, and not just when life is going well. If it is true that Christ calls us to obedience when life is tough, he also calls us to be thankful when life is tough. The apostle Paul wrote: Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of Christ Jesus for you (I Thessalonians 5:18). While Paul was serving time in prison, he wrote to the Philippian Church, Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. Sometimes hardship can actually help us appreciate what we have in life. [father and son drawn closer after a debilitating accident]

One of the hymns we sing during this season is called Now Thank We All Our God. "Now Thank We All our God, With hearts and hands and voices, Who wondrous things hath done, In whom his world rejoices." To hear and sing this old hymn one gets the impression it must have been written out of a time of great abundance. But in

fact it was written during a period of what was known as the thirty years war (1618-1648) in Europe. And it was written by Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinkart. His parish sat in a walled city called Eilenberg, and because it was a walled city, it became a refuge for political and military fugitives during the war, as well as families whose homes were destroyed. And with this overcrowding of the city came disease and famine and pestilence. By today's definition it would be called a pandemic. Pastor Rinkart even opened his own home as a refuge of these afflicted victims even though it he barely had enough to provide food and clothing for his own family.

The peak of the severity came in 1637 when Rinkart found himself the only minister remaining in that city. All the others had abandoned it. During this peak period he conducted as many as forty to fifty funerals – a day! And I wonder how it is that a man who stood there with his bible at the foot of mass graves of death could find the wherewithal to write a hymn of thanks, a hymn which includes the lyrics “He hath blessed us on our way, With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.” He believed and was convinced that no matter how surrounded he was by death, that in Jesus Christ it did not have the last word. When life dished out the worst, he held before him the one who overcame the worst. And so the final words of this hymn are: The one eternal God Whom earth and heaven adore, For thus it was is now, And shall be ever more. What God has given us in Jesus Christ, no one or no thing can take away.

Pastor Rinkart and that leper who turned back to praise Jesus, they both get it. Do we?