

Pentecost 20C Proper 23 Sermon 101010
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-11
2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

A very busy and important businessman was going to a vitally important meeting. He couldn't find a parking place no matter where he looked. When he was officially late and still driving around block after block, he prayed; "God if you would just make a parking place for me, I will give 10% of my income to the church and I will volunteer to work with the children's Sunday school every week for the next year." Then as he turned the corner – right in front of the building where his meeting was taking place – there was an empty parking place. The man looked up and said, "Never mind God. I found one." I guess you could say that 9 out of 10 lepers might not get the humor in that joke.

It is really clear from a reading, not only of the story of the 10 lepers, but of this entire section of Luke's Gospel, that the author wants us to get the message that we should rely on the grace of God and that we should give thanks to God always – for every blessing we have been given. Just like the lepers, we have *never* earned God's grace. And also like the lepers, we *cannot ever* earn God's grace. But in thinking about this story, I started trying envision how it would look if we were to retell it in terms modern Americans might better understand. You

see, this story would have been quite shocking to Luke's early audience. But it has lost a lot of that shock value over the millennia.

In order to understand this story more like its original audience would have, we need to understand what Luke was talking about when he called the 10 men "lepers." What this was *not* was what we think of when we think of leprosy. When we think of leprosy, we think of what is known as Hansen's disease, a neurological condition that causes loss of function in the nerves and blood vessels of the extremities – toes, feet, fingers, hands, noses and ears. The death of the nerves and the diminished blood flow to these areas can result in the loss of the appendages because of damage done during every day activities and the fact that the area no longer has sensation. Hansen's disease is communicable but in the last century medical science discovered that it was not so easily transmissible as to require that lepers live by themselves in "leper colonies," such as the ones of the Hawaiian island of Molokai or closer to home, Carville, Louisiana. Luke is not talking about Hansen's disease.

Many modern biblical scholars believe that Luke was actually talking about a condition that was – and is – pretty common in desert climates in the Middle East. The condition, called Elephantiasis, causes the skin to look somewhat like the skin of elephants – thick and rough – which would be easily recognizable if someone were to see such a person's skin. But other commentators have made

note of the fact that – reading the 13th and 14th chapters of Leviticus, which is where the biblical explanation of leprosy is contained, does not do much to narrow down what constitutes the condition. Some have speculated that leprosy could be a condition as simple as psoriasis.

So, why were lepers separated from the rest of society? And why were they treated so badly that they would be required to walk on the very shoulder of the road and scream out, “Unclean! Unclean!” as they travelled? Simply, because they were different and the Law of Moses had defined anything that was different as “unclean.”

So ... who are the lepers among us today? Who is it in American society who is looked upon as being different – and therefore whom it is socially acceptable to treat as less than human? Let’s look at last week’s news to see if there is an answer. The Supreme Court heard a disturbing case involving the Westboro Baptist Church and its habit of turning up at the funerals of fallen soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines and holding up signs that say things like: “God hates fags,” and “God hates your feelings.” These incredibly warped individuals say that they will continue to “protest” in this way until Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people are treated as having no rights – treated as less than human in this country. Later in the week, a sitting United States Senator went on the floor of that chamber and made a speech in which he said that LGBT people

should not be allowed to teach school in this country. If those are not examples of treating people like lepers, I don't know what is.

In Jesus' day there was very little known about the skin conditions that they referred to as leprosy. And through their ignorance of the condition – but because of their desire to remain “pure” or “untainted” by the disease – the people determined that it resulted from sin. So it is that the Old Testament never refers to anyone being “cured” of leprosy – only “cleansed” of their unclean-ness. Although it is lessening every day, there is still debate in this country about the cause of homosexuality. Some people believe that it is a conscious choice made by people. For those who subscribe to that theory, it is easy to see LGBT people as sinners and to decide to separate oneself from them and to treat them as “less than regular people.” To those who believe that one's sexuality is a matter of genetics and not choice however, it is considerably harder to see LGBT people as anything other than people with the same issues of sin, repentance and forgiveness as the rest of us.

When the lepers called out to Jesus, He didn't heal them. He saved them. The word that is translated as “made you well” can also be translated as “saved.” They have the same root. So Jesus wasn't worried about healing their physical condition, He was worried about saving their souls – exactly the same way He was worried about the souls of *every one* of His other followers.

Now finally, what about this Samaritan leper who was the only one to come back and thank Jesus for what He had done? Well ... Samaritans were the sworn enemies of the Israelites. The Jews and the Samaritans were all descendants of Father Abraham. But according to Jewish belief, Samaritans had lost their true connection with God and were worshiping a false god. Sound familiar? Everywhere you turn today, people are telling you that Muslims in this country are not to be trusted because – even though they too came from Father Abraham – just like Christians did – all of us through the Jews – they are now worshiping a “false god” and therefore are to be feared and hated. So if you want to know what effect this story would have had on its first century Jewish audience, try this.

On the way to His own execution, Jesus was going through the region between His own country and His country’s sworn enemy. As he entered a village, ten gay men approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us because we have been ostracized!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the religious authorities.” And as they went, they were saved. Then one of them, when he saw that he was saved, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Muslim. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of these Christians

found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you."

I would submit to you that that is how Luke's earliest audience heard this story. Your own emotional reaction is what Luke's listeners would have experienced.

Which reminds me of another story: A man complained to the preacher after the service one Sunday. The preacher asked him to explain what he didn't like, and the man proceeded to quote part of the sermon. The preacher responded, "But that was from the Bible. Those were the words of Jesus." The man said, "Yes, I know. I don't like the Bible or Jesus at that point."

As St. Paul said to Timothy,

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he will also deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful--

....

Remind them of this, and warn them before God that ***they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.*** Do your best to present ***yourself*** to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

And the word of truth is: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ... ALL of us.

Amen.