



October 14, 2007

Preaching: Jim Best, Director of Youth Ministries

Luke 17:11-19

“Where Did Everyone Go?”

“Were ten not made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” That is the question of the day, isn’t it? Where are the nine? Where did they go? Why did they not return?

Well, before we can answer this question, I think it is important that we look at what leprosy actually meant to the people back then. It was more than a wasting illness. It was more than a contagion that might spread. For the people of Jesus’ time, leprosy, and really any illness, was a physical sign of God’s displeasure. Not a very happy prospect, especially if, like me, you’ve been sick all week. But back then, if you had leprosy, then you must have done something really awful to deserve it! And when you had atoned for your sins, God would make you well. Once that had happened, you would only need to go to the priest, who would check to make sure your wounds were gone, and he would perform the cleansing ceremony to show that you could be welcomed back into society.

So when Jesus told the ten lepers to go and see the Priests, he wasn’t just saying that they were healed physically. When he says, “Were not ten made clean?” he is really saying “Were not ten healed of their illness and forgiven of their sins?” And that’s a pretty big deal, isn’t it? Which, perhaps, makes it all the more surprising when only one of the ten comes back to say thank you. For where were the other nine?

If we look at this passage critically, then we could come to the conclusion that the author of the Gospel of Luke is trying to prove a point here. It isn’t the fact that one out of ten came back to say thank you. What is important here is that of the ten, one was a foreigner, a Samaritan, and that of the ten, it wasn’t the nine

Jewish men who returned, but the unlikely one, the outsider, the Samaritan. It could be viewed that the author of Luke is once more trying to hammer home the point that Jesus was not simply there for the Jews, the Chosen ones, the people of Israel, but for all the people of the world, no matter where they come from.

This critical approach to the story, looking at the motivations of the author rather than the story itself, leaves us with a happy ending for this story, that Jesus came for all of us, and that makes us feel good...but it doesn't answer the question, does it? Jesus' words still hang there, "Were ten not made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"

Let's think about this, these nine, victims of a debilitating illness, forced to live on the outskirts of society and beg for a living, suddenly find themselves made well, their bodies made whole, and their sins forgiven. Why wouldn't they return to give thanks? What would have kept them away? In the book, "The Way of the Wolf", the author, Rev. Martin Bell has an essay that deals with this very question, and I will attempt to build upon what he says.

The first leper did not return for the very simple reason, that he was scared. He didn't understand what had happened, or why. One moment he was ill and the next completely healed; a Miracle! And miracles were the kind of thing that one heard about in stories or that happened to other people, not ordinary people like him. So he was scared and he did not return.

The second was upset that his redemption hadn't been harder to achieve. He wanted there to be a process and requirements and the need for effort. But instead, one cry, one quick prayer, and Jesus had forgiven them and healed them. He felt cheated and so he did not return.

The third, well, he quickly realized that when it came right down to it, he hadn't wanted to be healed. Being a Leper had given him a place in society and it had defined him. Without that, he didn't know what to do with his life or where to go. He had lived with his illness for so long that it had become a part of him, and without it, he didn't know who he was anymore.

And then there is the fourth Leper. The fourth Leper's excuse is one we can all understand. She simply forgot. When she found that she was healed, she was so happy, so excited, that she forgot to go back and say "Thank you" until it was much later, and then she felt rather embarrassed by the whole thing. She felt that bringing it up now, after so much later would seem awkward or insincere. So she never said "thank you".

The fifth Leper, well, he didn't say thank you to anyone anymore. Having been forced outside of society simply because he had the misfortune of getting sick; having been forced to beg and plead with people day after day, to simply earn enough coins to be able to survive; it had made him hard and bitter. He had stopped thanking people a long time ago, and this was no different.

The sixth Leper had a family. She had been separated from her husband and children by the illness, and the moment she found herself cured she ran straight home, unable to wait for that reunion, even for a moment, and so did not return to say thank you in her rush to get home.

The seventh was similar, but different. He wasn't as worried about returning to his family as returning to his life. He had a business that his brother had been running for him, and he needed to get back and make sure that everything was running smoothly. Then he needed to check on his house and make sure that everything was fine and that no major repairs were needed. Then he needed to see what yard work had to get done...and on the list went. He was far too busy to run back and say "Thank you".

The eighth didn't return because she simply did not believe that Jesus had anything to do with it. She was healed, true, but there had to be a scientific reason for it. She didn't believe in mystical healings or miracles, so instead of saying "thank you", she went off to find out the real reason she had suddenly been cured.

The ninth was the opposite, he believed! From the bottom of his heart he knew that Jesus was the son of God and the Messiah, and that Jesus had just healed him and forgiven him all his sins. So he charged out into the world to tell everyone what had happened and help them see the truth about Jesus.

So there we are, nine possible reasons why the lepers may not have returned to give thanks. Nine possible justifications...nine possible excuses...nine possible rationalizations. Do they sound familiar? I know they do to me. Did one or more resonate with you? Did you find yourself nodding along with any of them?

I think that sometimes it is easy for us to hear this Gospel story and gloss over the nine who didn't return. I think it is easy for us to maybe just read the story and see a message of comfort and love and leave it at that. But we can't stop there! Don't get me wrong, today's story is all about the power of Jesus' healing love and forgiveness, a power that is available to all the people in the world! And yet, this story, for me, is also about saying "thank you".

There are so many good things in our lives, so many blessings, but how often do we stop what we are doing and truly say “Thank you” for those gifts? That’s a hard question, isn’t it? If you are anything like me, then the answer is far too infrequently. But like the nine, we have our reasons, don’t we?

Maybe we don’t say thank you, because we are always looking for something more. It could be that we are so focused on the negatives in our lives that we don’t even see the positives. That we are so focused on what we don’t have, that we miss the things we do. Every year, when I would go on mission trips to places like ASP, I’d see youth come to this realization. All of a sudden worrying about having a better cell phone or a new version of an iPod seems pretty insignificant when faced with people who don’t have adequate housing or enough to feed their family three meals a day.

Maybe we don’t say thank you because we don’t even realize the gifts are there. We are so used to the good in our lives, or surrounded by it, that we have accepted it as a fact of life, and not a gift that should be praised. I did a lesson with the youth fellowship groups where I asked them to write down everything they were wearing and had in their pockets or purses and figure out how much each of those items would cost to replace. We then compared those totals with the average incomes in third world countries. I think most of the youth were shocked that many of them were wearing more than some families earned in a year. Maybe we don’t say thank you, because we haven’t had our eyes truly opened to all the gifts in our lives.

Try to think about all the gifts in your lives. Think of all the things you have to be thankful for. Think of all the things we as a church have to be thankful for. Think of the blessings this church has received and the fellowship we’ve shared. Think of the people in your lives who have supported you, with a smile or a helping hand. Think of the people who have supported this church with their energy, and their time, and their faith. Think of all these things and think about when was the last time you sat down and thanked God for putting these people in your life? When was the last time you thanked God for this church and all the wonders within it? And when was the last time you thanked God for all the gifts in your life, the greatest of which was the gift of Jesus Christ, whose love embraces us all, and whose sacrifice set us free.

And so here we are, all of us Lepers in our own way. And all we can do is bow our heads and say, help us Lord to find the time to say Thank you. Help us Lord to not get so bogged down in the business of life, that we miss your gifts for what they are. Help us to remember to thank you and your Son Jesus Christ, so

that at the end, Jesus isn't looking around saying, "Weren't others made well? What happened to them? Where did everyone go?"

Thank you, Lord, for all the gifts in our lives. Thank you for the gift of the church and everyone in it. Thank you for the works of your church throughout the world, for organizations such as Operation Christmas Child and the CROP Walk, and thank you, Lord for your Son, Jesus Christ, who forgave our sins and made us well. In his name we pray.

Amen.