

**Good Shepherd Episcopal Church**  
Lexington, Kentucky  
Sermon for October 10, 2010 ~ Proper 23C  
Luke 17:11-19  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Like any pastor, I spend a fair amount of time around sick people. Sickness is just about the worst thing life can throw at us. It's not only the pain and the physical misery, but the mental and spiritual anguish as well. We want to ask, "why me?" Sickness is the everyday, in-life experience of vulnerability, finitude, death. Sickness isolates and at its worst is a foretaste of what it is like to have the world go on without you, to be nothing. Sickness is a reminder that life is fragile, limited, vulnerable, and *terminal*. Sickness is a brush with death. Is that why people who are well are so threatened by sick people?

In our gospel for today, Jesus encounters some sick people. Samaria is a region between Galilee in the north and Jerusalem in the south. Jews usually went around it because they considered the Samaritans to be a corrupted race. The Samaritans were not especially fond of Jews either. On his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus cuts through Samaria and there he meets ten very sick people. Lepers. Why is he going to Jerusalem? You know what awaits him there, in just a few months. *Death*. Jesus is an outcast in Samaria and he is on his way to death in Jerusalem. That makes this an interesting location for him to meet ten lepers.

Here are ten people who have been cast out by family and neighbors and made to wander helplessly because they are afflicted with a dreaded disease. They are marked for death, not just in the future but now, today. Like Jesus himself they are doomed to die. So, as far as these lepers are concerned, they are already dead. Out in Samaria an outcast Jesus meets ten outcast lepers. Moreover, at least one of them is a Samaritan so he has two strikes against him.

Standing away from Jesus they cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Jesus looks at them and tells them to go "show yourselves to the priests." (cf. Lev.14:2-3) This is a bit confusing. They have asked to be healed. But Jesus has done nothing to heal them. He's only told them to go and *act as if* they are healed. Go, present yourselves to the priest as if you are healed, whole, accepted, living people.

Either they trust him or they have nothing better to do, so they obey him. And, in the process of *going*, they are healed. Jesus didn't do what they expected. He didn't mix spit with mud. He didn't command a demon to come out. He didn't say, "be healed." He treated them as if their healing was an accomplished fact and told them to go to the priests as required by the Levitical law. As far as they were concerned, Jesus had nothing to do with their healing. But one leper, a Samaritan, made the connection! He came back loudly expressing his gratitude. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And Jesus says to the Samaritan, "go on your way, your faith has saved you."

**So, what do you make of this medical miracle?** One Samaritan leper had faith and was healed. The other nine, who demonstrated no evidence of faith, were *also* healed. What's the difference between the unthankful nine and the thankful one that Jesus is pinpointing with his terse reply?

The ten lepers are all dead people, anyway you talk about them. They would love to be healed, which in this context means to be resurrected, to be raised from the dead **which they assume would send them back home to a "normal" life.** That's all they ever asked for, just a chance to be like other people. They assume that's what Jesus is all about, a return to the normal, a revival of the ordinary for people who, because of infirmity and illness, are ab-normal and sub-ordinary.

But one of the healed lepers, the Samaritan, experiences something *beyond* healing. He experiences resurrection. He alone comes back to say, "thanks." He realizes that this healing puts him in relationship to Jesus and that relationship alone has made him whole and alive again. All the other nine wanted out of Jesus was to be made well, to go back home and start all over again, doing what everybody else had been doing. And who would blame them?

**But that one Samaritan comes back not only cured but saved!** Because he saw that his resurrection wasn't just for the future, it was for now. This is the gospel's response to a sign I saw last week out on New Circle Road. The sign asks, "Will you meet God in heaven?" A gospel that is only concerned with future salvation isn't the gospel! Resurrection, the Kingdom of Heaven, Abundant life, Easter is from *now* on! Jesus saved and accepted that Samaritan in the here and now while he was a leper, before he got well. That man alone realized that Jesus didn't just want to make people well, ordinary, and normal. He wanted to raise people from the dead. Easter is now!

The healing began for all of them not when they were healed but when they met Jesus who *took them as they were.* But only one of them knew it so he alone came back to say "thank you, Jesus." He recognized that he'd received a gift! Grace! When grace is offered, we are on our way to getting more than even a dermatologist can do for us, on our way to being saved, becoming Easter people.

**Where are the nine? Why aren't they leaping and shouting for joy?** They are back at work, back to business as usual, nothing more than normal. Skin now clear and clean, lives all progressing along nicely, and everything so, so utterly, boringly normal. What a shame, to have met Jesus, the Sovereign and Giver of Life, the one who loves to eat and drink with sinners and take us and embrace us just as we are, and to come away with nothing more than normal.

What a shame, for people to settle for Monday, when they could have had Sunday, Easter. What a shame, out on the road toward death, to have met Jesus headed to the cross, and to have come away only healed when we could have been saved. Why have you come here today? To be made normal or to be drawn closer into a living, saving relationship with the Giver of this feast? Do you want a pat on the head or on the back or do you want a new heart and a new spirit? Are you looking for one of your five familiar hymns or do you want the Spirit of God to teach you a new song? Do you want a snack or do you want to feast upon the Bread of Life? He's here. He's tasted death and defeated it. You and I still have death to look forward to. Shall we live with the power of death and the sting of death as the determinative force in our lives? Or, shall we run back to him and shout *eucharistia*? Thanks be to God for this unspeakable gift?