

THE TEXT

LUKE 17:11“As Jesus was going to Jerusalem He passed along the border of Samaria and Galilee. ¹²And as He came into a certain village ten men who had leprosy met Him. They stood from a distance, ¹³and they raised up their voice saying ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’ ¹⁴And seeing them, Jesus said to them, go, show yourselves to the priests. And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵And one of them, seeing that he had been healed, returned with a great voice glorifying God, ¹⁶and he fell on face before the feet of Jesus thanking Him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷And answering, Jesus said: ‘Were not the ten cleansed? But where are the other nine? ¹⁸Was no one found to return to give glory to God except for this foreigner? ¹⁹And Jesus said to him, rise, go, your faith has saved you.”

SERMON

You might remember from last week’s Gospel reading that there was a lot of talk about transplanting mulberry trees into the ocean. Jesus had told his disciples how they must forgive a brother or sister who repents, even if they wrong them 7 times in a day. That’s incredibly hard to do, and so the Apostles cried out to the Lord to increase their faith. But it is not a task impossible for Jesus, and not one they do apart from him. Just as he could command a mulberry tree to be relocated to the watery depths of holdfast bay, he could indeed—and does—free people from the guilt of their sin simply by saying so.

We heard Jesus teach us that as often as someone repents, asking to be forgiven, forgiveness is to be extended, because the church is the only place where forgiveness and grace in God’s name is pronounced and goes to work—grace that brings healing, wholeness, restoration and peace.

That grace is very much on display again in today’s Gospel reading. Luke tells us that as Jesus was going to Jerusalem, he travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.

This boundary between Samaria and Galilee isn’t simply geographical. The Jews despised the Samaritans. The Samaritans were once Israelites but because they had rejected God’s covenant they were exiled in Assyria, where they bowed to idols at the places of worship the evil King Jeroboam had established. This border is also a division between who is judged to be unclean and who are the holy; a boundary between those who were pleased with their own efforts at morality and who judged others for their immorality; a boundary between those who saw themselves as righteous and their neighbours as unrighteous; those who believed they were pleasing to God, opposed to those on the ‘other side’ whom God would reject.

They hadn’t understood that all people, in their natural standing before God, are unrighteous and ritually unclean; that all people can only be right with him by his grace. The Jews had condemned the Samaritans and written them off *because of where they came from*. They saw no possibility for God to show them any grace or favour.

Along comes Jesus, very close to this unholy place. As he travels along this border, ten men suffering from leprosy call out to him. At the time Luke wrote there was an even greater social stigma attached to this highly infectious skin disease than there is today. People with leprosy didn’t only suffer physical affliction, but also from the associated physical, emotional and spiritual isolation imposed upon them. Sufferers of leprosy were shunned, cut off from the community, with little hope of any support or care. Israelites who had the disease were regarded as ceremonially unclean and not able to join the rest of the worshipping community at the Temple. Their restoration to the community could only happen after they were pronounced clean by the priest, having undertaken a complex purification rite and offering ritual, detailed in Leviticus 14.

So we hear of multiple boundaries in today’s text. Boundaries that shut off people from meeting with God and receiving his mercy and grace. As Jesus enters their village the ten men with leprosy

know that Jesus is able to help them. They know that they have no other hope. They know that they have nothing to bring or give to Jesus to merit a favourable response from him. Imagine what would have been going through their minds right then. Jesus was so close, yet they had to stand at a distance. How could that required distance and separation between them and Jesus be removed so that they could receive his help? All they can do is cry out as beggars for Jesus to show them mercy: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us”.

Jesus tells them: “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” The implication is that when they go before the priest, he will be able to pronounce them clean. They are to go as clean men, even though they are ritually unclean. This is a profound act of faith in doing what Jesus had told them to. While unclean, they trust in the promise implicit in Jesus’ command, and set off to present themselves to the priest as clean men to be pronounced clean.

As the ten men went, they were cleansed. One of them came back, glorifying God. He returns with a thankful heart—a heart full of thanks and praise to God for the undeserved mercy and help God has lavished upon him. Jesus said: “Were not the ten cleansed? But where are the other nine? Was no one found to return to give glory to God except for this foreigner?”

The Samaritan knows he’s on the wrong side of the fence. Defined by the community on the basis of where he comes from, and where he can’t go, he knows how ritually unclean he is before God. He knows how unworthy he is. He doesn’t need anyone else to tell him. Judging him won’t change anything.

But God’s grace can. Jesus declares: “Rise and go, your faith has saved you.”

Grace was the theme of last week’s Gospel reading, and it’s repeated in today’s also. Jesus is the sinless Son of God; the unblemished Lamb who came to this broken and fragile world; a world in bondage to decay, to make all things new. He has taken away the sin of the world, restores people to God and makes them whole. The cleansed Samaritan points towards the new thing God had begun—of bringing a multitude of foreigners beyond Jerusalem into the communion of saints of all times and places, transcending all cultural and geographical borders to purify the people of God through Jesus his Son.

That is why thanksgiving is also a key theme in today’s text: thanksgiving to God from the most undeserving and helpless of people, for God’s incredible, lavish grace.

As we live in the world as God’s church in today’s times, giving thanks to God bears a simple but profound witness. Giving thanks comes with the humble understanding that all that we have—even every breath—is given by God in grace. This is counter-cultural for today’s society, which instead makes demands. Media and advertising teaches and conditions us to *not* be thankful for what we have, because it is insufficient. The world teaches us that we never have enough; to always want more, and that we will never be whole unless we purchase the latest stuff, shaping our identity by what we consume, which will make us more popular, lovable, successful and fulfilled. This is the gospel of our times, trusting that these things will liberate us from the pervasive pessimism that hovers over the face of the earth like a shadow, but in reality, this only compounds the problem because there is no such quantity as ‘enough’.

If last week’s gospel of unlimited forgiveness—and this week’s theme of love and grace that reaches beyond barriers of judgment and condemnation—are marks of the church, then giving thanks is likewise to be central to the church’s practice.

Because we are human, it is easy to be like the nine men who were healed, but who forgot to thank God. So often in the church we can ask, but forget to thank. We often ask for healing, but forget to thank God for the health he’s granted. We demand God give us what we want, rather than thanking him for meeting all our needs. We forget to thank our sisters and brothers for the

roles and tasks within the congregation they do, instead placing an expectation upon them that they will always keep serving us. We can be more used to voicing complaint when our demands aren't met, rather than giving thanks to God and others. What are the borders we might put in place, rather than welcome others?

That is why that today's reading is less about healing our physical ailments, and more about healing our hearts. The Samaritan falling at Jesus' feet and Jesus' beautiful pronouncement to him: "Rise and go, your faith has saved you" shows, I think, that this healing went far beyond the leprosy. It is less about healing and more about hearts being made whole, and holy, by Jesus.

For we were once like those in our text. We were once like the Samaritans, unrighteous in God's sight, having turned away from him. We were once like the ten men with leprosy, unclean with the leprosy of sin. We are not here because of our religious performance, or family heritage, or how righteous we might appear on the outside. The cry of those in our text: "Lord, have mercy" are given to us in worship to voice too. Those words draw us to join with the 10 beggars in our text, to cry out to Jesus for his merciful help, acknowledging that we are here simply because of God's grace, with nothing in our hands to bring him to warrant his blessing of us.

And our text connects with a second point in our service. The words of thanksgiving: "Let us give thanks to the Lord" and "Let us bless the Lord"—words that are a part of the Holy Communion liturgy. We are called to give thanks to God for his saving help through Jesus on the Cross, which is delivered to us personally in this holy meal. We are called to give thanks because here at this table there is no boundary fencing off the unholy, the unclean. Jesus has opened the way, and hosts you at his table, so that by his powerful word, the bread and wine that he serves you are his true holy and precious body and blood, to bring you grace and forgiveness from heaven, salvation and mercy from the Cross.

This meal is Jesus' own sermon by which he proclaims to you that his Father's completely underserved gift of mercy to the whole world he has given to you, and that the same grace and compassion that he showed the Samaritan man with leprosy, he has also shown to you. It is through Jesus that God has brought you his ultimate healing. Hear his own words to you: "Your faith has saved you."

Thanks be to God! Amen.