

# GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Sunday Sermon, October 10, 2004

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 23c

Reading: Luke 17:11-19

<sup>11</sup> On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup> As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, <sup>13</sup> they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” <sup>14</sup> When he saw them, he said to them, “**Go and show yourselves to the priests.**” And as they went, they were made clean. <sup>15</sup> Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup> He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup> Then Jesus asked, “**Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? <sup>18</sup> Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?**” <sup>19</sup> Then he said to him, “**Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.**”

## “Following Jesus”

We live in a world afflicted with all kinds of leprosy. The world has little time for lepers. Everyone wants to be young, thin, rich, and self-sufficient. Most people pay little attention to their health until something goes wrong. Compassion for the sick is available as long as you can pay for it, and when you cannot, you have a real problem. As a result, far too many people live as victims, forced to exist at a distance for those who have been either smart enough or lucky enough to stay healthy. Like so many people in our world, the lepers in our gospel reading cry for mercy, hoping and longing for someone to heed their cries and restore them to health, making their bodies and their lives whole again.

Thank God, not all the cries for help go unheeded. Luke reports that one-day ten lepers were healed. They were healed on their way to show themselves to the priests. As we hear the story, we know that Jesus clearly was the one responsible for their new health and their new life.

The lepers could see only that they were restored to health and nothing more. What did they think had happened to them? Were they just lucky? Were they just in the right place at the right time? Perhaps they had done something to deserve this reversal of fortune. Whatever the case, they could not see beyond their own immediate gratification. They have no sense of gratitude. Self-absorbed, they are now afflicted with notoriously bad behavior. They go merrily on their way, without giving the slightest thought of stopping and thanking the one responsible for their reversal of fortune.

This behavior was not only bad manners; it was also a reflection of their bad faith in the good will of Jesus. The lepers' bad manners also led them to keep bad company. All but one does not return to the company of Jesus. Even though the story does not say for sure, in all probability, in order to return to society and receive approval, the lepers seek the company of the priests and the approval that their Law provides. This legal verification may temporarily give them the approval they seek, but they have chosen the wrong company to keep. Turning away from Jesus and instead seeking the approval of the priests of the Law is a deadly choice. They will miss the blessing that Jesus grants only to the leper who returned to give thanks.

The point is that rejection of Jesus is a rejection of God. The nine lepers are healed for now. The day will come when they will discover that they are lacking in something else and without Jesus, God will not be able to bail them out of their situations. When the one leper chooses to return to Jesus, he chooses not only good company, but also the best company of all - the company of God. Being in the company of God may not seem like such a good idea for those who lack the approval of priests and the Law. However, this God "in Christ" is different. This God dares to be gracious and merciful to even lepers and outcasts.

As the story in Luke unfolds, we hear again that Jesus not only suffers on the cross for daring to approve of those who do not have approval from the priests and their Law, but Jesus is raised from the dead. We

follow this Jesus, who through cross and resurrection has the divine right and authority to overturn even God's own judgment and give new life, even for those who do not deserve it.

One leper returns and gives thanks to Jesus for what he has done. He recognized the giver behind the gift. This recognition is faith in God. The leper is returning to not just another man to thank him. He is returning to praise God. Such faith does not go unrecognized. Jesus recognizes that this leper has received something the other nine did not. He received faith. Such faith makes him well. The Bible uses the Greek work "sozo" and that is important. It indicates that not only has the leper's poor health been healed but also his relationship with God has been restored. In other words, he is "saved". What makes this response even more stunning and surprising is that he is a Samaritan, an outcast, a loser, the least likely to return and praise God in the form of Jesus of Nazareth.

As the story begins, this one leper like all the lepers, was isolated, ashamed, and separated from others. Hurt and diseased, so all he could do was worry about himself. Now, there is no more shame. Now he is freed from his own self-preoccupation. Now he can live strong and confident. Jesus sends him on his way to do just that.

That is, to live life centered in Christ-like faith. That means to keep on doing what Jesus did. That is, to speak of God's mercy, to heal the world, to care for the sick and the broken, and to be a witness to God's love "in Christ" to others.

As part of our response, we will begin to offer healing moments in our worship services once a quarter beginning in January 2005. I will share more with you about this in our November Staff newsletter. In addition, many of you know our Parish Nurse program is coming into being and we will continue to make the benefits of this ministry known among you.

This too is our way to follow Jesus. As a congregation, we support health and healing ministries in our community and we encourage greater emphasis on health needs and education among our members. In this way, we begin to mend God's relationship to the world where there can be not only healing and health for those in need, but, ultimately, the celebration of salvation of faith active in love. Let us give thanks to a good and gracious God for all of God's blessings.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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