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Luke 17:11-19

WHERE ARE THE NINE?

The story of the healing of the ten lepers, only one of whom who returns to give thanks may be among the most misunderstood texts in the New Testament. It is a great example of why serious Bible study is the responsibility of everyone in the church.

At first glance, it seems very simple – just one more example of the compassion of Jesus, doing what Jesus does when he encounters a group of people who needed healing — in this case from a terrible disease. He heals them. They are ten lucky lepers, if you will, because they just happened to meet Jesus on the road (as opposed to meeting Buddha on the road).

They go back to their village, and after discovering that they have been made clean, only one turns around to express his overwhelming gratitude. So of course what this means is that everyone is playing their part in what seems like a simple morality tale fit for Sunday school.

There are three crucial elements. Jesus is being Jesus-like (thank you Jesus). The lepers are acting like lepers (poor lepers) appropriately helpless and hopeless until they meet Jesus (it's their lucky day). And finally, the lone grateful leper returns to praise God for his healing and thus models the appropriate behavior of any former leper lucky enough to meet Jesus (we call him the Lucky Leper with a Soul).

He was raised right. His mama taught him to say thank you, when someone does something nice. The other nine don't even write thank you notes. But the Lucky Leper with a Soul threw himself down on the ground (which is exactly what one should do in the presence of Jesus), and praised God with a loud voice. In other words, woe is me until I met thee, and great is the power of God in you for you must be the messiah. My healing must be just another mighty deed like only the messiah can do, for which any grateful soul would be, well — grateful!

In fact, this text is often used around Thanksgiving time, because, well as everyone can see, it's about the *gratitude* of the one, as compared to the ingratitude of the nine. This kind of superficial exegesis can make for a terrible sermon, by the way.

As a teenager, I went on a retreat once and attended a worship service in which a Baptist minister was going on and on about this text, and using it to shame us all, because he just assumed that we were a bunch of ungrateful teenagers.

The title of his sermon was: WHERE ARE THE NINE? And he got all worked up. "They all got healed," he thundered, "but only one recognized that the healer was the Son of God!" So my question to you my friends is this: "Where are the nine? How is it possible for human beings to accept the gift that is the healing power of Jesus, and then go on about their lives as if they have nothing to be thankful for! Where are the nine?"

Then it got personal. He stared at us and began to make us feel miserable. You young people are completely unaware of the great gifts that you have been given. It's as if you think the world owes you something. You accept the love of your parents, but don't thank them; you have bread on your table, but wolf it down without saying grace, and what's more, please hear me now – your very soul has been purchased, washed clean in the blood of the lamb, and all you can think about is where will you go tonight with eight of your ungrateful friends?

I was wishing the whole thing could just be over with. But for good measure, the preacher belted it out a few more times, "Where *are* the nine?" That's when one of my friends turned to me and said, "the same place I would be if I could get out of here!"

Bible study is hard work, which is why we believe in bringing the Jesus Seminar on the road to Mayflower and why the results of that recent Pew Research Poll on religion is so discouraging. It confirms a sad but true fact — atheists and agnostics know more about the Bible than church-goers! Part of our problem, of course, is that we've been listening to people talk about the Bible, often in a loud a sanctimonious voice, without actually studying it without all the tools available to us.

Our first clue comes from the opening line of the text. Remember, the scriptures are incredibly distilled, and sparse when it comes to details. So you can assume that there is more meaning packed into a single phrase than in today's romance novel, for example. Listen, "On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee."

The key word in that sentence is the word "between." This incident takes place between

two worlds, the world of the Jews and their purity system, and the world of the Samaritans, who were considered by the Jews to be unclean, and therefore part of a class called the untouchables. Samaritans were the lepers in that world, whether they had leprosy or not, because they were unclean.

Whenever you read “Samaritan” in the New Testament, whether it’s the story of the man beaten and left for dead on the road to Jericho, in which only a Samaritan gives aid, or the Samaritan woman at the well with whom Jesus has that remarkably candid conversation, we are dealing with the *enemy* here. He or she could not be touched; and you could not allow yourself to be touched by someone who was unclean.

If you want to carry the metaphor forward, and the Bible is only a living document when you do, then imagine a place between an all-white gated community and a black ghetto community. Imagine the worlds that collided in Jena, Louisiana several years ago when students at a high school hung a noose in a tree where the black students gathered. The marriage that produced the current president of the United States was illegal in Oklahoma until 1966. It was all about keeping the gene pool pure.

Speaking of which (pools that is), during the civil rights struggle in the south, when motel owners were first ordered to allow blacks to swim in the hotel pool, managers would often add huge amounts of extra chlorine in order to help inoculate their white guests from contamination. I have a black and white film clip that I show my students at the university that shows a manager walking along the edge of the pool and pouring in the extra chlorine because the law was forcing him to allow the untouchables into the pool.

So right away we know where this incident with the lepers occurs and it gives us our first clue as to the meaning of the text. It takes place between the world of the pure and sanctified, and the impure and non-sanctified – right where Jesus on the road always pulled off the road. He always took the wrong exit.

Add to the tension of this “in-between-ness” the absolutely horrible and highly contagious disease that was leprosy. It literally consumed both body. In order to contain the disease, every society on earth has confined lepers to what are known as colonies. So we don’t just have the enemy here, or the untouchables here. We have the enemy and the untouchables here.

You see, Jesus is not just out for a walk, and happens upon a group of lepers. He has gone to the world in-between and the text says he “entered a village” where ten lepers approached him. Because he is in the area, and word has spread about his healing powers, the lepers decide to approach him, but they “keep their distance,” calling out “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Well, of course, we expect that Jesus will do just that, after all, this is Jesus. But if we read carefully, we notice that Jesus does not do any healing in this story at all. He says, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Now I don’t know about you, but I don’t like this. It sounds more like a referral than a healing. Why doesn’t he do something? Does he know something about how this will turn out that we don’t know?

And then it gets even weirder. It reads, “And as they went, they were made clean.” What does that mean? It sounds like they were healed on the way, before they even got to the priests. Was their healing psychosomatic? Does the expectation of healing actually help to produce healing? It can, of course, but I don’t think that is the point. You see, in those days, priests not only diagnosed leprosy, but were also the ones who declared a leper to be ritually unclean. So by sending the lepers to the priests, Jesus raises the possibility that they would not only be healed but also declared pure, which was essential if they were to be reintegrated into society.

But Jesus knew that one of them was a Samaritan, and that something very strange would happen even if the lepers were cured – and that is that the stigma of being a Samaritan would not be cured. That is, the world can be “healed” and still not be “whole.” Sometimes, in fact, when the status quo is restored, so are the divisions that afflict the status quo.

Leprosy made all ten lepers exactly the same sharing in the horror and the stigma of their disease, even though one of them is not Jewish, but the enemy of the Jews. Think of it this way – it’s like a former millionaire who loses everything and finds himself underneath a bridge in the company of bums. The millionaire may still talk with the accent of one who has gone to fine schools, while the speech of the bums may be slurred, but they are united by their poverty and helplessness, just as the lepers are united by their disease.

But once that disease is healed, even if the lepers are healed just by believing that they are healed, Jesus knows that the priests will still reject the Samaritan. In fact, once the ten are restored from their physical disease, their spiritual disease will not only remain, but come back to divide them where once they were united.

When they all had leprosy, their Jewishness or their “Samaritan-ness” did not matter. But in a system where priests could declare some to be clean and others to be unclean, the real issue (which in this text is not leprosy, but the purity system), would return. Once restored to the community, the nine lepers who are Jewish can go on with their lives, restored to their place. But the Samaritan leper is still a Samaritan. He may be healed, but he is not whole.

He returns to praise God and give thanks because he recognizes in Jesus not just healing, but a hope that what divides us at the most *fundamental* level might be overcome. The nine who do not return are not being ungrateful, for one thing, Jesus did not heal them so in fact they have nothing to thank him for. They just have their old lives back and nothing has changed.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, turns back to Jesus, and in this simple phrase, that he “turned back” there is a metaphor for reversing the purity system itself. He can’t go home again (to quote Thomas Wolfe). The priest may be able to restore him, but they won’t. Even if he is healed, he will still be an outcast, so he returns to acknowledge that in Jesus, more than healing is being offered, and that’s what Jesus means when he says, “your faith has made you well.”

In the strange math of the kingdom (which Luke loves), one healed *and* restored Samaritan counts for more than nine healed lepers with the correct family tree. The purity system did not need to be pruned, or reshaped like a vine in a vineyard. It need to be torn up by the roots, and overturned, because there is more than one way to be diseased.

Luke tells the story in the most dramatic way possible, because what physical disease could be more horrible than leprosy? And yet what spiritual disease could be worse than a system that condemned someone to being an untouchable even after their physical health was restored?

Think how far we have come now from that guilt-laden sermon, “Where are the nine?” Where are the ungrateful nine, who need to get back to Jesus to thank him — for what? — for referring them to the priests? What Jesus has in mind is not just that bodies need to be healed, but *systems* need to be healed. The vast hierarchies of rank and privilege that humans construct are an offense to God. The Samaritan turns back because the road home does not get him home. He will always be a foreigner, except in a place called the Kingdom of God.

You and I can fall victim to the same delusions. We can talk a good game, but there are times when we realize that the system is broken, not at the micro level, but at the macro level. We still have this false dichotomy in church between religion that is personal and prophetic, as if Christianity can be personally redemptive without be socially responsible. It is good and right to help the man who is beaten on the road to Jericho, and for the unlikely hero to be a Samaritan, but it would also be nice if someone were to get together with a group of concerned citizens and start patrolling that road — so people didn’t get robbed there in the first place.

Christians are sometimes good at fishing people out of dangerous waters downstream, but nobody seems interested in going upstream to see who or what is throwing them in. We too are healed, but definitely not whole. We use the hatred of illegal aliens (and by the way, no human

should be called an alien) to score political points, while they are doing the work that nobody else will do.

Explain to me why the pay-day loan industry is legal? So that we can add to the misery of the poor? Why do we throw credit cards at anyone who can walk or breathe, or sell houses to people without jobs and for no money down? Because we live by the motto expressed in the acronym IBG (I'll be gone). That how the world keeps throwing the poor into the river upstream so that charity can fish them out downstream.

We are healed, not to return home, enjoy our good health, and become part of the system again but to live differently, breaking down divisions in society that exclude people because of their nationality, gender, religion, or education.

Last Tuesday night I engaged in a dialogue with an orthodox rabbi from New York City at Meacham auditorium on the campus of the University of Oklahoma. Just the two of us, sitting on the stage in a couple of director's chairs trying to figure out what it is that Christians and Jews don't get about each other. I freely admitted that sometimes it is embarrassing, even maddening to see followers of Jesus who are so mean and judgmental, and the rabbi said that most of his Jewish friends recoil at just hearing the word "Jesus."

But I also said to the rabbi, it is not just a Christian problem. Take the famous passage in the Hebrew Bible, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Notoriously misinterpreted to justify capital punishment, it was really meant to limit and make proportional the idea of retribution. It does not preclude violence, but seeks to limit it, and the rabbi agreed. He went on to say that it also warns against taking advantage of the weak or those of a lower station in life — gouging out the eyes of all the slaves for example, in punishment for a righteous man who loses his eye.

Then I said, "so tell me why Israel, in response to the death of one Jewish man several years ago from a rocket fired by angry young Arab men in the hopes of taking out just one Jewish eye, launched an invasion of Gaza, a largely defenseless concentration camp, that resulted in the deaths of over 1,800 Palestinians, many of them women and children. One Jew/1,800 Palestinians – was that a proportional response?"

At that moment, it got unusually and uncomfortably quiet. Because whether Jewish or Christian or Muslim, or none of the above, we can be healed but not whole. We can be sanctified but not redeemed. We can be chosen but not choose to be compassionate. We can be righteous but not restored.

Where are the nine? They are safely back on the right side of the border, and I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't call a meeting to discuss building a wall (which they can help to construct now that they are able-bodied) that will keep out former Samaritan lepers, lest they get any funny ideas about where they belong.

Healing is not just about the restoration of good health. It is about tearing down what separates us, one from another, and remembering that hatred is the most widespread and contagious of all diseases. Where are the nine? Home and feeling better. Where is the one? Feeling better, and truly at home. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, October 10, 2010

Lord of Life, we gather in this room to worship because we do not live by bread alone. We gather with our friends and loved ones because we do not want to walk this way alone. We sing, and we pray, and we consider the words of wisdom we call the gospel because the world's wisdom can seem so shallow and insignificant. We know where to go to eat; where to go to play; where to go to relax. But we also know where to go to consider what all of it means, and whether we are truly living, or just amusing ourselves to death.

Let this hour be a different kind of hour than all the others in the week, so that all the others in the week might be shaped by this one. And for all the things we worry about, and all the prayers that are arising in our hearts, which you already know about, we come to you in a moment of silence. . .

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