

A Whole New World
Leviticus 14:1-9, Luke 17:11-19

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Sometimes you're watching a movie or reading a book, and one of the characters does something so unbelievably stupid that it kind of ruins the story – like in a horror movie, where the teenagers decide to go and investigate the creepy sounds coming from the basement in the abandoned mansion instead of just calling the police. And maybe you feel that way when you hear today's gospel reading, the story of the ten lepers healed by Jesus, when only one comes back to say thank you. How is that possible? Ten men healed, and only one comes back to Jesus to give thanks? We like to think that if we were one of those lepers, of course we would turn around, come back to Jesus, give him a big hug and promise to follow him forever. How could anyone do anything else?

But this story isn't quite as simple and straightforward as we might think. Jesus and his disciples are travelling towards Jerusalem, and as they enter a village they are interrupted by a group of ten men, ten lepers, men who have contracted some kind of painful, contagious skin disease and so are excluded from participating in normal society. These men are outcasts, they are unclean, they are not allowed to have any contact with the rest of the world. Their lives are described in the Law of Moses, in the book of Leviticus, chapter 13 verse 45: "If you have a dreaded skin

disease, you must wear torn clothes, leave your hair uncombed, cover the lower part of your face, and call out, "Unclean, unclean!" You remain unclean as long as you have the disease, and you must live outside the camp, away from others." These ten lepers stand at a distance from Jesus, and yet their cries cross that distance; they reach Jesus, he hears them, and he responds.

But you'll notice he doesn't heal them. You would expect Jesus to just say the word, and they would be healed, but he doesn't do that. He tells the lepers, "Go, show yourselves to the Priests – go let the priests examine you." And again, this is exactly the process as described in Leviticus for a leper who has been healed: On the day you are to be pronounced clean, you shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall take you outside the camp and examine you. Then you've got that business with the birds, and then you shall wash your clothes, shave off all your hair, and take a bath. You may enter the camp, but you must live outside your tent for seven days. On the seventh day you shall again shave your head, your beard, your eyebrows, and all the rest of the hair on your body; you shall wash your clothes and take a bath, and then, finally, you will be ritually clean. This is a long and complicated process, and it doesn't even actually end there – on the eighth day after this week of purification there is another entire set of elaborate sacrifices and rituals that must be performed before that person can be declared finally and completely clean. It's a process that the priests would have taken very,

very seriously, and it was the only way the lepers could ever re-enter society as clean, purified children of Abraham. And so when Jesus tells the lepers to go and let the priests examine them, he's telling them to go and start the process of reintegration, go and get the ball rolling, go and take the first step of their journey back into fullness and health.

Of course, there's just one problem: The lepers aren't clean yet. They're still lepers. What Jesus is telling them to do is to start on the long journey to Jerusalem, travelling through the countryside, through communities who want nothing to do with them and their uncleanness, their disease, to leave the country they know - where to get handouts, where to find compassion and help - and travel into the unknown, and then what? When they get to Jerusalem, they're going to call the Priest and ask him to examine them, when they haven't been healed yet? The priest is going to go to all that trouble, get together all those birds for the ceremony, and he's going to come out of the city at great personal risk of contagious disease to meet with these lepers who claim to have been healed, and then what? What will these men say when the priest learns they are still unclean, that he's come to meet them for nothing? Jesus is asking a whole lot from these men, to set out on a journey with no guarantee that the healing will actually happen. There are a thousand reasons not to go, to stay right where you are and keep living the way you've been living, not to risk such a journey and such an embarrassment on the possibility of healing from this miracle worker. But there is not a

moment's hesitation in any of those ten lepers. Every single one of them immediately sets off for Jerusalem. Every single one of them reveals complete and utter faith in Jesus' word, despite how difficult it is for them to follow, despite how hard it is for them to understand. In the passage just before this story, Jesus' disciples just asked him to increase their faith, to shore up their faith against the challenges of his teaching, but here are ten faithful followers, ten men who trust Jesus and set out for Jerusalem, confident that they will be healed. And that's exactly what happens. Somewhere on the journey between Jesus and Jerusalem, one of the lepers looks down at his hand and sees that the sores and the wounds were gone, that his skin is whole again, and as he shouts out in excitement and shows his hand to the others, they all realize that their wounds are gone as well, that they have been healed, that they've been made whole again.

Now, try to get inside the heads of these ten faithful men at this very moment. Leprosy and other skin diseases are not necessarily something you are born with; they can be contracted at anytime by anyone who happens to be infected, and as soon as they show signs of disease they are declared unclean and cast out of their community. What this means is that it is quite possible, even likely, that each of these ten men has or had a home, a family, a community where they belonged. They had wives, they had sons and daughters, grandchildren, brothers and sisters, they had jobs and possessions and houses and beds to sleep in, each of these men had a whole world where they belonged, and then they got sick, and they lost

everything. They were kicked out of their homes and communities, they could no longer touch their wives or hold their children or greet their friends and brothers, they could no longer sleep in their bed or eat their food or take part in all the things that they had loved and enjoyed. They lost their entire world, reduced to living in the street, on the edges of society, wearing torn clothes, hair uncombed, covering their faces, and calling out, "Unclean, unclean!" And now, in one moment, Jesus had changed everything. He had healed them, he had made them whole again, they could have their world back, they could go home, they could see their families again, they could hold their wives and children in their arms again, everything they had lost could be theirs once more, and all they had to do, the only thing left to do, was to get down to Jerusalem and see the priest, to be declared clean and purified in the eyes of God by God's representative on earth, the High Priest in the temple of Jerusalem, and then they could finally go home. And remember, this is a long process, more than a week of waiting to make sure the disease is really gone, and those lepers would have wanted to get started immediately, to get down to the priest without any delay, so that they could be declared clean, so that they could have their world back.

Now I ask, honestly, if you were one of those ten lepers and you found yourself clean, and you realized that your entire life, the life you had lost was waiting for you with the Priest in Jerusalem, would you stop, turn around, turn away from Jerusalem, turn away from home, turn away

from everything you've been hoping for and praying for and wishing for every minute of your life since the leprosy came, would you turn and go back to Jesus? I honestly don't think I would. I would be thanking him all the way down that road to Jerusalem, and I'd be telling everyone back home about the amazing man who healed me, but at that moment the last thing I'd want to do would be to put any more distance between myself and Jerusalem, any more distance between myself and the priest who could declare me clean, who could give me my world back.

And yet that is exactly what the tenth leper did. He stopped, turned around, turned away from everything he had ever wanted, and he went back to Jesus. He comes back praising God in a loud voice, he throws himself at Jesus' feet, and he thanks him. And remember, he is still legally considered unclean until he sees a priest, he is supposed to keep his distance from the clean disciples and the clean Jesus, but none of that matters now, nothing in his old life is important to him now, his old world, his old worries, everything he had considered precious, none of that has any concern to him now, because in that moment his whole world is Jesus, the only thing that matters to him is thanking Jesus and praising God. He responds to the great gift of healing that Jesus gives him not just by giving thanks, but by giving everything, everything he ever cared for, giving it all up for the sake of being with Jesus. In that split second when the tenth leper is healed, he knows that Jesus is more precious to him than

everything else in the world could ever be, and so he forgets everything else and goes straight to the foot of Jesus to worship.

And here's the thing – those other nine lepers, who showed such faith in leaving Jesus and heading to Jerusalem, they were still healed – still incredibly blessed to have encountered Jesus, to have had their lives and bodies transformed by his power. They went to the priest, and they were declared clean, and they got their old worlds back, they could live out the rest of their lives in safety and comfort, but that tenth leper who went back to Jesus got far more than that. Jesus' final words to the leper are usually translated as "Your faith has made you well," but that's not really what it means – It means your faith has saved you. Nine lepers went to Jerusalem to be declared clean, but the tenth went to Jesus to be declared forgiven. Nine went to Jerusalem to get their world back, but the tenth went to Jesus and entered a whole new world. Nine went to Jerusalem to get their lives back, but the tenth went to the one who gives eternal life. The tenth leper gives up everything so that he can be with Jesus, and Jesus tells him that his faith has saved him, not just from the ravages of his bodily disease but from his sins. The leper is given a tremendous gift from Jesus, and he responds by giving his whole self to Christ in praise and worship, and Jesus declares that he is saved by his faith.

We too have been given amazing gifts from God, earthly gifts, wealth, health, family and friendships, all the things we celebrate on

Thanksgiving, all the things we enjoy throughout the year. But we've also been given a far greater gift, we have been called children of God, we have been invited into God's family by his Son, Jesus Christ, we have been given the unending love of the one who died to save us from our sins. So how do we say thank-you? How can we possibly show gratitude for such infinite gifts, for our daily bread and for the bread of heaven, for our family on earth and for our Father in heaven? How do we use those gifts we have been given? Do we use them to secure our own comfort, to get our own world back to the way we want it, to make sure that we are considered clean and acceptable by the standards of the world, pausing on our way to say a brief word of thanks and then resuming our quest for what we desire, or do we respond to the gifts of God as the tenth leper did, by turning away from everything else and throwing ourselves at the feet of Jesus Christ, at the foot of the cross? Can we give up the world we so love and cherish and treasure Jesus above everything else? Can we let go of our own standards of purity and simply praise God for what we have been given, and then use our entire lives to glorify and worship the One who gave up everything for us? Giving Thanks isn't about one day or one moment or one word or one action, it is looking at what God has done for you in Jesus Christ, looking at what God has given you through his Holy Spirit, and responding to that gift by giving your life, giving yourself to Christ, offering yourself as a transformed and saved servant of the most

high God. Today, may we give thanks to Jesus Christ by giving ourselves and our world to him. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.