

The One Who Returned Luke 17:11-19 (ACC Zion 6/23/13)

11 As he was on his way to Jerusalem, he was passing along the borders of Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered into a certain village, ten men who were lepers met him, who stood at a distance. 13 They lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." As they went, they were cleansed. 15 One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice. 16 He fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks; and he was a Samaritan. 17 Jesus answered, "Weren't the ten cleansed? But where are the nine? 18 Were there none found who returned to give glory to God, except this stranger?" 19 Then he said to him, "Get up, and go your way. Your faith has healed you." (World English Bible)

Some years ago, one of my friends built a church from the ground up--from fundraising to laying it out to seeing it built. Vonna and I helped with the fundraising and planning--and our band was invited to do some special music at the dedication service.

One of the local ministers was asked to do the invocation and he began this way: "Oh Lord God, Creator and Sustainer, Almighty Father--I thank you first of all that this morning I opened my eyes..."

He then continued to be thankful for the rays of sunlight streaming into his bedroom that morning to the moon and the stars and his car and his wife and his children. He pretty well covered the alphabet from the AAA coverage on his car to the zebras at the local zoo.

In all, the invocation lasted for about 20 minutes and I'm not sure, but I think he was even thankful for the IRS and mosquitoes. You can imagine that this was the beginning of a VERY long service--though it was also a great service.

Personally, I make a real effort to pray public prayers that are short and to the point--and I really think that his prayer was too long for the context of a special service--but I will admit that I have never forgotten that opening line..."Oh Lord God, Creator and Sustainer, Almighty Father--I thank you first of all that this morning I opened my eyes..."

In the Phillips translation, James 1:17-18 says, "Every good endowment and every complete gift must come from above, from the Father of all lights, with whom there is never the slightest variation or shadow of inconsistency. By his own desire he made us his own sons through his word of truth, so that we might be, so to speak, the first specimens of his new creation."

"Every endowment and complete gift..."... That includes almost everything doesn't it? From the shoes on your feet to the car you drive--to the AAA coverage and the zebras at the zoo, you might say.

Every man, woman, and child on this earth--no matter how poor or downtrodden has SOMETHING to be thankful to God for--but those of us who have a relationship with God through Christ have the privilege of being the "first fruits of his new creation..." through the sending of the Son, as scriptures say, "...while we were yet sinners..."

Still, watching the news will clue you in that we as a nation and as a world are not all that thankful--that we have come to EXPECT. We EXPECT to be comfortable in our homes and we EXPECT to have

enough money and we EXPECT to retire while we are still young and we EXPECT the waitress to be prompt with our coffee and we EXPECT the government to take care of us and we EXPECT our car to last for 100000 miles or more and we EXPECT to wake up every morning--to “open our eyes” and yet, when our expectations are met, we often fail to thank those responsible--or even thank God.

I COULD be old and cranky and start talking about how lack of gratitude is a modern phenomenon, but the reality is that it was also an issue during the ministry of Jesus. Jesus may have healed more than a few who didn't say “thank you” and acknowledge the wonder gift he had given, but scripture DOES record one very powerful instance where lack of gratitude was clearly displayed--even in the face of his power and his graciousness in healing--that was the scripture I read a little while ago.

Leprosy or Hansen's Disease is bad news. The disease itself is horrible in every way. Those affected have lesions and bumps and open sores. Their flesh literally rots away, leaving holes and even missing features. You can lose noses or toes or fingers. There was no cure in Jesus' day other than divine intervention--and the prognosis is not much better today. Not only that--the disease is contagious.

In Biblical times, it seems that many different diseases were considered to be leprosy and the rules in force were in place to keep others from being made either physically or spiritually unclean. These rules are found in Leviticus 13. They were not allowed to come near “clean” or uninfected persons. They were forced to shout “UNCLEAN!” as they walked from place to place--warning others to stay away. They were not even allowed inside the walls of a city.

They often banded into groups with other lepers. I can't think of any work that might do, so the only way they could live would be by begging--living on the graciousness of others. Even so, help from God's people may have been in short supply because in the culture of the Jews--a leper was seen as a sinner who was under the judgment of God.

You probably know, but the Hebrews and then the Jews understood their world based on the idea of retribution. If bad things happened to you, it was because you had sinned before God. If bad things happened to you and you APPEARED to be righteous, then there had to be hidden sin in your life--or your ancestors were sinners--because God didn't make mistakes when he was handing out punishments. No way around it--either you or your family caused your problems.

Under that “system” of retribution, the bigger the sinner you were, the greater the judgment of God in your life. Anyone who had been cursed with leprosy HAD to be a great sinner...so a leper was literally an outcast religiously and spiritually as well as socially.

With that in mind--in our passage, the ten stood at a distance and cried out to Jesus. They were supposed to stay away from clean persons and they were doing what was commanded by the law. They shouted to Jesus. They called him master, so it is clear they had heard of him and had heard of his power to heal the sick. They may have positioned themselves there because they heard he was coming--that he was traveling through their area (by this time in his ministry, he could go nowhere without a crowd surrounding him). They probably figured it couldn't hurt to try.

Verse 16 it says that one of the ten was a Samaritan. Isn't it interesting that the Jews accepted him into their group? This is the only story in scripture where the Hebrews or Jews were even willing to breathe the same air as a Samaritan. I guess they were so beaten down that it was not worth the effort to fight those old cultural battles.

I can imagine them now. Nine Jews and a Samaritan. Filthy, sweating, oozing pus from their sores. What a disgusting mess! Waiting in the scant shade of a weathered olive tree--waiting to see if HE was really going to pass by.

Maybe they had dragged themselves quite a ways during the night to get there--to be waiting beside the road. If they actually had Hansen's, every step would have been filled with pain. Torturous step after torturous step--but it would be worth it if he really did come by and if he really COULD heal them--and if he WOULD heal them.

By mid-afternoon, they may have given up. It was just a rumor. They probably would have left the pitiful shade of the tree, but there was nowhere else to go. No one wanted them--not even their families. No family. No friends. I imagine them dozing there in the scant shade--mostly hot sun--in the heat. One may have kept one eye open hoping and watching--if so, I like to think it was the Samaritan. [sit down]

I can imagine his face as he begins to see the dust from the crowd. He sees the crowd--and sees that they are literally mobbing someone. At first he is not sure he can trust his eyes, so he makes a shade with his hands **like this**.

As he sees the size of the crowd and the central figure, he knows it MUST be Jesus. His eyes widen and the caked dust around his eyes and mouth cracks as he begins to smile.

He tries to wake the others but he is so excited and his mouth is so dry that at first no words will come out. Just a croak--but then finally he finds his voice and he is able to yell--and yell he does--"it is HIM, it is HIM!!!" The others rouse slowly at first, but faster and they all come and stand by the side of the road with the Samaritan. Then he jumps up on a rock to get a better look. [go up on platform]

As the crowd approaches, they stand back, just as the law says. With all the noise, they have to shout several times before Jesus hears them. FINALLY, he turns toward them and they shout in unison. "Jesus, Master, take pity on us!" and again: "Jesus, Master, take pity on us." and then again only louder, "JESUS, MASTER, TAKE PITY ON US!!"

I can imagine that everything stops at that point. No one talks and no one moves. Silence--but then Jesus says quietly, simply, "Go and tell the priests to examine you..." Did they turn and look at each other? Did they say, "That's IT?" Did they shrug and pass sideways glances before they started to move, as a group--in search of a priest??

If he was really going to heal them, shouldn't he make a little bit of a show out of it? Wasn't he going to DO something? They were OBVIOUSLY not healed--they were still the same--why should they bother finding a priest?

Still, there were rumors--stories about his healing power. Maybe this was enough to cause 10 helpless men to have a little hope--and begin shuffling toward the temple--heads and eyes on the dirt under their feet.

I like to imagine that they were just over halfway to the temple when the Samaritan caught a glimpse of one of the Jews out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly he stopped and blinked and then held his head high, "STOP!!!"

Looking from man to man--they were healed! Then he dared look at his own hands--he was whole, too. "LOOK!"

They looked at each other and then began to dance and to hug. They laughed and then they cried. They shouted. "I'm CLEAN!" over and over and over again--as if they couldn't believe what they saw. Some began to thank God.

I can imagine then that the Samaritan found that the 9 gathered together and that the cultural barriers took over and he was the enemy again, a Samaritan. Then they may have said, let's go see the priest and then our families.--continuing on without him.

Maybe the Samaritan fell on his face and began to cry and pray--thanking God. With a sudden intake of breath, he said, "I must go back and thank Jesus!" He ran back to the road as fast as his new-found strength could carry him. Then he fell at the Master's feet and began to sob, "thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Jesus looked at the man and then he looked the way he had come, "where are the other nine?"

Are you a child of God today--a Christian brother or sister of Jesus the Christ? If so, you know how it feels to be cured--to be a healed leper.

Before being healed by the Master, you and I were victims of a horrible disease--one that disfigures and causes pain, but one even more deadly than leprosy. Leprosy can kill the body, but what we had kills the soul--our sin would have separated us from God for eternity. But Jesus saw our need. He saw our sickness--and he chose to give himself --to make us acceptable before God.

The question is, are we like the 9 Jews or are we like the Samaritan?

As we live our lives transformed--I challenge us all to continually say, "thank you" to God for his wonderful gift of grace. It would be right and proper to remember God's love and his provision for us daily--if not several times each day.

God's people have the privilege of thanking God for so many things--"that this morning we opened up our eyes..." but for so much more--for making a way for us to be sons and daughters of God.

We are NO LONGER UNCLEAR! We have much to be thankful for.

If you are a child of the Living God, I challenge you today to remember to thank God every day for his love and for his healing.

If you haven't yet been healed, I challenge you today to call upon the Master. Not only does he heal physically, he also heals spiritually. Through Him we can stand before God, clean and whole.

I challenge each of us today to have a spirit of thankfulness before God. Not just from aardvarks to zebras--not just thankfulness that we were able to open our eyes through the power of God--but thankful that God has made a way for us to be complete!