

October 14, 2007
20th Sunday After Pentecost

“At His Feet”

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

Sermon

Today's Gospel lesson is pretty short and seems pretty straightforward. Jesus heals 10 lepers and only one comes back to say thanks. So what's up with this story? What immediately comes to mind is gratitude or lack thereof. I could preach it that way and I probably wouldn't be wrong. I could certainly talk about all the material blessings God has provided and then go into the much more important blessing of forgiveness that came through Christ's death and resurrection. And then I could treat the story almost as a parable, asking all of you where you see yourselves in the story. Are you the nine who are blessed by Jesus but ungrateful, or are you the one who returned? The crushing hammer of the law could be brought to bear as I speak about all the ways we repeatedly fail to show gratitude to God for all He has done for us. And then would come the sweetness of the Gospel; that God sent His Son to die anyway, despite our ingratitude, so that we can return to Him again and again in repentance and receive forgiveness for our failures and sin against Him.

All of that is true and we've all probably heard this story told that way. It's easy for us to understand and because of that it is probably the standard way to go with Sunday school classes for kids. I went that way in the children's message and I may very well go that direction in the very pulpit some Sunday years in the future. We are ungrateful. We often don't appreciate the wonderful gift Christ has given us through His suffering, death and resurrection. Despite that, He did it anyway so that we can return to Him again and again and have our failure to act out proper gratitude in our lives washed away. Our sin is removed.

But I think there is much more than ingratitude going on here.

This short story opens by pointing out that Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. Jesus is on His way to be crucified, glorified on the cross. He is on His way to complete the ultimate act of mercy for all mankind. And then He is greeted by 10 lepers who say, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." And Jesus, being all about mercy, tells them to go and show themselves to the priests.

That order by Jesus was loaded with meaning for the lepers. They were probably well aware of what the Bible says in Leviticus 14 about the process and sacrifices necessary for a healed leper to be declared officially clean in the eyes of the Hebrew community. Lepers were unclean. They weren't allowed into the camp of Israel during the 40 years of wandering in the desert and they weren't allowed into normal society once Israel had settled in the Promised Land. They were outcasts, unable to worship, trade or socialize within the Jewish community. The only reason they had for going to the priests was so that they might be declared "clean" if their disease had been cured. So it was probably with some expectant excitement that these ten set out towards town to present themselves to the priests.

"And as they went they were cleansed." This is a critical point in the story. Up until now the ten were probably wondering if this Jesus was really all that He was cracked up to be. When they left Jesus they were still diseased and weren't quite sure what was going to happen when they reached the priests.

But along the way they become healed and the reality sets in that the priest will see them and actually see fit to declare them as clean. And although the text doesn't tell us, I think I can guess what began going through the minds of nine of those lepers. I bet they picked up the pace, maybe even began running toward town, wanting to be the first one to reach the priest. They were thinking about how they wanted to get the sacrificial process started. They needed to get the clean birds, the two male lambs without blemish and one ewe lamb without blemish and an ephah of flour etcetera, etcetera and do the guilt offering and the sin offering, because once all that was done they were back baby. They were back in the family. They were back in the community. They could hang out their shingle and get back into business. They could hang out in the market and take part in the festivals again. They had their life back!

I don't know that their failure was in the area of gratitude so much as it was in realization of what was important, in realization of what God was doing. The fact is, in going to the priests they were really only doing what Jesus had told them to do. And who knows? Maybe they were in fact praising God as they went on their way. What they didn't understand was that in going to the priests they were heading away from Christ and eagerly looking toward a return to their broken, earthly life. They were looking forward to the sacrifices and rituals which had to be made again and again, and in fact for many had simply become going through the motions in order to remain respectable in society. They probably were thinking that once that priest declared them clean, then they would enjoy peace and happiness.

But one guy stopped and turned around. One guy thought about town and the priests and the sacrifices and returning to a normal life, but he realized that something much bigger than that was going on. Maybe it was because he was a Samaritan and knew he would never be fully accepted in Jewish society. Maybe this guy knew his Bible better than the others. Maybe this guy had heard John the Baptist or Jesus speak about the kingdom of God before. Whatever the reason, this guy realized the truth; what was going on with the priests and the sacrifices and a return to normal life back in town paled in comparison to what God was doing through this man, Jesus Christ.

"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus feet, giving him thanks." We tend to focus on the giving thanks part here, but it's not the thanks Jesus speaks of. *"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"*

There's the key. This Samaritan is bowed down at Jesus feet in worship and it is indeed giving praise to God. The Samaritan, the one who would never be fully accepted at the temple in Jerusalem, is the one who recognizes where God is, who God is. Throughout Luke's gospel Jesus has been telling people about the kingdom of God. This guy finds it. The other nine, proper Jews mind you, are really wasting their time somewhere else. The kingdom of God is near, but they kept on walking away. This guy gets it.

And when Christ says, *"Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well,"* Jesus may be talking about more than just leprosy. Nine other guys were healed, but they don't get these words. I think Jesus may be talking about forgiveness. He may be speaking of citizenship in the kingdom of God. This Samaritan chose to follow Jesus rather than the world. Jesus says his faith is in the right place. Jesus is going to Jerusalem to win the victory which guarantees that faith in Christ is saving faith which gains entrance to the eternal kingdom of God.

We find this pretty easy to understand here in church, but in life we find it very easy to do the same thing as the nine lepers. Is going to the priests bad? Is seeking to function in society evil? Not at all, but the nine were still in the wrong place, even though it appeared they were doing just what Jesus told them to do.

We can be doing the very same thing in our lives. Is working hard at our jobs and careers bad? Is spending a lot of effort on our family immoral? Is recreation and leisure evil? Certainly not! But if we think doing these things right is where we will find peace and contentment, we are surely in the wrong place. In all of these things we need to be where that tenth guy is; bowing down at the feet of Christ as

the source of all true blessings. We need to be giving thanks and praise and glory to God, and looking to Jesus Christ for the continuing blessing of forgiveness from sins.

We can even be in church, thinking we're doing those things Christ tells us to, and still be in the wrong place. Take Fall Fest for example. A lot of people are doing a lot of work to put on this shindig to raise a lot of money which is going to help a lot of people. It's a good thing...unless somebody is doing it thinking that by doing so they're making a sacrifice that merits them some good standing and blessing before God. Then they're in the wrong place. If we think that coming to worship on Sunday and singing hymns and putting our cash in the plate means that we are a good person in the Father's eyes, then we're far from where we need to be.

Salvation is not found in the doing of worldly good works. Peace isn't found in being great at your job or family. Grace isn't found by "doing church" right.

The right place to be is at the feet of He who went to Jerusalem to suffer and die, to make the only sacrifice that merited forgiveness of our sins. In all we do, we are to be falling down on our face at Jesus' feet. We are to be on our face in repentance for our sin, followed by being on our face in praise and adoration for the forgiveness that always follows. It is never about us being clean; it is about He who cleanses us from sin. It is about thanksgiving and more. It is about being at the mercy of God. At the feet of Christ we cry "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" and He does. And in all we do we remain faithfully at His feet because we know that it is only through Him that we enter God's kingdom.

We know that through Christ's death and resurrection He says to us today and will say to us at the gates of heaven, "Rise and go your way which is My way. Your faith has made you well."