

**Luke 17:11** 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."

November 20, 2016

## From Unclean to Clean

Luke 17:11-19

Jesus is going to Jerusalem. He is going there to be ridiculed, rejected, crucified, and left alone to die. He is heading south into the land of the Samaritans, when he hears voices calling his name. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." He looks in the direction of the voices and sees a group of ten lepers, coming as close as they dare, yet keeping their distance.

You are in that group. You wake up one morning with a rash, or maybe it is something red and scaly on your knees or elbows. Today we might call it shingles or psoriasis. But you know it as leprosy. Few people in the Middle East in Jesus' day actually had Hansen's disease, what we call leprosy. Any skin disease could be called leprosy. When you see the redness, the bumps, and white skin flaking off your arm, your stomach drops. Not because of the medical dangers, but because of the social ones. You do not go to a doctor, but to a priest. He looks you over, doesn't like what he sees, calls it leprosy, and officially declares you...not sick...but unclean.

And your whole world changes.

He doesn't put you in the hospital, or send you home with a prescription. He orders you out – not out as in, go back home, but out as in, you can't go back home. Out as in out of your home, out to the edge of town, where from now on, if anyone comes near, you must cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" This doesn't mean, "Contagious, stay away." It means, "Cursed by God, rejected by God. Stay away from me or you may be cursed, as well." Sickness was not a medical problem, it was a spiritual one. It meant you had done something to displease God, and this is your punishment.

You stumble in shame out of the town and gratefully find a few other lepers with whom to keep company. Your family begins to bring you food, but they cannot touch you. Homeless, untouchable, cursed by God, you are tragically, devastatingly, *unclean*.

One day, there's murmur in the crowd walking along the road not far from where you and your unclean friends have encamped. Jesus of Nazareth is coming. Going to Jerusalem. Coming this way. He's been healing people. Even healed a leper. When you're desperate, you beg.

All ten of you begin to shout, to cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

He hears you. He turns and looks your way. You see something different from most folks when they look at you. Instead of disdain or judgment, you see compassion. Instead of ignoring you like most folks, he stops, turns and looks right at you, and says, "Go show yourselves to the priests." Very strange. He doesn't touch you; he doesn't tell you you are healed. Just, "Go show yourselves to the priests."

As you and your friends begin to run to the priests, you look down at your arms, and they are clear, clean. The skin of your whole body is as clean and clear as the day you were born. All ten of you begin to laugh, to dance, to run even faster to get the official word that will allow you to go home, to hug your family, to sleep in your bed. No more of the edges and fringes of society; no more of the shame. You are well. You are free. You are clean.

But, suddenly, you stop. The other nine dance on toward the priests' home, but you stop, turn around, and begin to run the other direction. Away from the priests, toward the healer, toward the one who has made you clean. You run to him and fall down at his feet in a posture of worship and unworthiness; a posture of submission and honor; a posture that says he is greater than you and yet he has seen me, healed me, and made me clean. A posture that says...

*Thank you.*

"Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Of course it is the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and, of course, this story is a powerful reminder of how many times we are like the nine who were healed and never came back to say thank you. The truth here is that nine times out of ten we forget to stop to really be grateful. Of course all of that is in this story. But, it goes deeper than that. There's more to it than that.

There's a very real sense in which each one of us knows what it is like to be unclean. For a sixth or seventh grader with a terrible case of acne, it might as well be leprosy because you feel like you've been exiled to the outskirts of the popular group. It may be that your weight is too high, or your height is too short, or your IQ doesn't get you past the basic classes. Maybe it's the color of your skin, or the country you came from, or whatever may make you seem like a foreigner to the people around you – you know

what it means to be pushed out to the fringes. Your sexual orientation may do it, or just not fitting into the mold your family or friends have made for you.

Maybe you've made some mistakes in life, some bad choices, and nobody looks at you the same as they did before, even if you've paid the price. Maybe you've done some things very few people know about, but you do, and you're sure if they did, they'd send you out to the edge of town; they'd call you unclean. Even if we never have been declared a leper, we're all just a bit afraid we might be, and we're so afraid someone's going to see it one day. And we'll be laughed, ridiculed, rejected.

This is also true: each one of us knows we've done some things wrong, sinful, and we feel unclean about it. Unforgiven and unforgiveable. We said things; done things; and if anyone knew the things we've *thought*, we'd be outcast for sure.

It may well be that the sins of which we're most often guilty are ones that have rejected and shamed and marginalized others.

Most all of us are afraid that one day someone's going to discover how unclean we are and then the world will know and we'll have to go around telling everyone to stay away from us because there's something wrong with us and they really don't want to get too close. It may be that the world is made up of two kinds of people: lepers and those who are afraid they will be found to be lepers.

And maybe there's one more group of people. Those who have seen Jesus turn toward them in love, compassion, and understanding, and have heard him say, "Go show yourself to the priest," and on the way, they looked and realized it was gone. The thing that made them unclean was gone, erased, forgiven, disappeared. They realized that they had been made well, made whole, saved. They are clean.

Imagine the joy of shouting, "Clean! Clean!" Being free to embrace your family, your friends, to embrace life itself because you don't have to hide anything. You are clean all the way down to your soul. It has all been washed away. The stain of sin, the pain of not measuring up, the guilt of all those moments when you worshiped other gods and pursued passions and indulged appetites and gratified greed – gone. Your soul is clean as though those passions and appetites and greeds had never existed.

You didn't wash those things away, he did. The man on the road headed toward Jerusalem. He removed the stigma and shame, the scars and sins inflicted on you by others and inflicted by you on others. Go, show yourself to the priest. You're clean.

And the only question is, of course, which direction do you go now?

He's still back there on the road, and if you look real closely, you can see the dust of one person, running toward him and falling on his knees.

Is today the day we stop, too? Stop running away with all our blessings, looking for more; too busy to do more than wave; toss a quick "thank you" over our shoulder. Is today the day we stop the ungrateful pursuit of the next thing, turn around and join that one guy over there on his knees saying thank you to Jesus?

Shall we make the other nine into the other eight? And maybe not just today, but every day we could stop and give thanks for being made clean.