**Luke 17:11-19** Pentecost 21

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*Luke 17:11 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. 12As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance 13and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”*

*14 When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.*

*15 One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. 16He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.*

*17Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? 18Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” 19Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”*

**Nine Did Well, One Did Better**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Quite a few of you are familiar with dogs. And you know that many dogs, when they pick a place to get comfortable and lie down, they walk around in a small circle two or three times and finally lie down. Some people in the know think dogs do this is because in the wild dogs have to trample the grass to make it comfortable to lie on. I don’t know if that is true, but it sounds reasonable.

You watch your dog turning in circles. You smile and wonder, but deep down, there must be a reason.

Our reading today follows some lepers, these are sick people. And if you were watching from a Google-Earth view with the sound turned off, these guys look like they are running in circles. First here, then there, then away, then back again. But like the dog circling her bed, every turn of these people is significant. In fact, every turn is instructive for the Christian life. So watch them as they take Three Turns for the Better.

**I. The First Turn for the Better**

\* Abandonment: A certain man couldn’t remember what had happened. He regained consciousness, trapped in his car unable to move. He was frightened. He was injured. It was night. He heard voices, but they were no comfort. “The voices” were pretty sure that the trapped man had caused the accident, and as far as they were concerned, he, trapped in his car, was getting what he deserved. Trapped, injured, and the people who could help him could hardly have cared less. He felt abandoned in his moment of need.

\* Poverty: Closer to Miami than we are to Disneyworld, is Haiti. One of the very poorest nations on earth. The results of its poverty have been exposed again. If Haiti’s 2010 earthquake had occurred in a wealthy country, probably would have killed dozens or a few hundred people. But in poor Haiti, nearly a quarter million people died. Haiti is sadly in the news again with this week’s hurricane. The destruction and death toll again are many times higher than they would be in a wealthy country. The effects of poverty are at their worst in times of need.

\* Terminal Illness: Even for a Christian, the effects of some diseases are discouraging. It isn’t so much the diagnosis of a terminal disease. It’s what the disease does. The chronic pain, the restricted diet, the treatment and its side effects, the downward spiral of health. You know people who have been through this.

The abandonment of the accident survivor, the sorrows of poverty, the side effects of terminal illness. What is the connection? If any of these thoughts of abandonment, poverty or disease cause you to thank God for what you have, then thank God you were not a leper in the ancient world. The leper in the ancient world suffered all these things and more.

The person afflicted with leprosy was placed in permanent quarantine, cast out of the city or village to live only in the presence of other diseased, abandoned lepers. Shut out from the economics of society, they lived in abject poverty. They were required to tear their clothing as a warning to others to stay away. Their disease, which could be a variety of skin diseases, was usually a life sentence. Not necessarily that they would die in a short time, but these diseases were not curable. They lived like this to the end.

“How could God allow such things?” many ask. Even we may ask it sometimes! For those who doubt God’s care, these afflictions are reasons to turn far, far away from God.

Resist the impulse of the selfish human nature. Sometimes, like spoiled children, we defy God to explain the tragedies of life—and in this I do not minimize the tragedies of the abandoned, the poor, the terminally sick. Resist the impulse to tell God that since he isn’t giving you what you want, you are headed for the doors. Turn *toward* God in your time of trouble.

For these lepers, their personal disasters of leprosy, the worst thing that ever happened in their lives, was exactly the thing that brought them into contact with the Savior of all. Their disease was the thing that created the first great turn of our text: they turned to Jesus in their hour of need. Unable to humbly kneel at his feet as so many did, nonetheless, they approached him as lepers could. They “ambushed” him outside a village. They found a place where they could shout to him from a distance, and he would hear. From a distance they would plea for his mercy, and then wait for his answer. ***“And they called out in a loud voice, ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us!’”***

Have you ever thought of the difficulties of your life in that way? Have you ever reflected that they are opportunities for you to turn to your God? Those moments when you and I feel abandoned, when you just don’t know how you will make ends meet, when that most precious gift of health is taken from you, when you feel like a leper in your own world—that is a time to search out the one who turns no one away, no not one. Call out, ***“Jesus, Master, have pity on me.”*** Turn to him in your time of need.

**II. The Second Turn for the Better**

The second turn is the most amazing turn. Now listen carefully to what happens in verse 14, ***“When he saw them, [Jesus said], ‘Go, show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were cleansed.”***

Jesus had pity on these suffering souls. Seeing the need of these lepers, he gave them what he had to offer, and what he had to offer them was health. And yet, Jesus, weighing both the bodily and the spiritual need, doesn’t simply wave his hand over the diseased skin and heal them, but he requires them to act in faith. ***“Go, show yourselves to the priests.”*** These priests were the ones in Jewish life who could declare the leper cleansed and the quarantine was over. They could send them back to family and friends. And so Jesus tells them to go to the priests, still unhealed.

Many people would scorn that sort of help. “If you want to help, then help. If not, fine. But why are you telling me to run around for miles on this fool’s errand?”[[1]](#footnote-1) But Jesus insists that they trust, that they go as he said, even though he has not healed them. Perhaps Jesus is asking a bit much here.

But is this not how our lives are? Does not a child’s obedience in small things lead to a parent’s blessing in much bigger things. And so Jesus tells them to go without promising a cure to them, without them seeing a change in the scaly skin, without them feeling a sense of wholeness. But as they go, their skin clears, feeling returns, they feel like they could run a marathon for the first time in years!

This second turn of the lepers, the turn to leave Jesus’ presence, the turn to go trusting him, was an occasion to be blessed by God. How often does our stubbornness at some small point prevent us from receiving God’s greater good gifts that he gives to faithful obedience.

Now let me be clear here. This is not talking about salvation from sin. The cure to sin is something that we can never pay for. Forgiveness for our sins has been won, the payment made and heaven opened, without any work or merit on our own. It is ours only through the Holy Spirit’s work of faith in our hearts.

But it is also true that God blesses obedience. These blessings of obedience look exactly like they do in our reading. Going, they were healed. What if the lepers had not gone as Jesus said? I am pretty sure they would not have been healed (cf. Mt. 13:58). We understand this because while a parent will be sure that a disobedient child has enough to eat, that disobedient child might just get a little less dessert than the rest of the family.

We Lutherans don’t often talk this way. But in Scripture we see this principle at work: God blesses those who listen to him. Or maybe it is better to walk it back a step and say it this way: those who trust God obey God. And those who obey God receive an extra measure of blessing from God.

Think of Abram: told to go to a new land, and through his obedience immensely blessed. Think of Mary: told that she would give birth to the Savior and simply said, “May it be to me as you have said.” On the other hand you can look at many examples of people, even believers, whom God wanted to bless, but their stubbornness blocked his blessings.

Each of us experiences that in our lives. Obedience to God is always on his terms, not ours. That is a sign of faith and trust. When we bend our will to God’s, his blessings do come to us. But here is an important point: those blessings are of God’s choosing. It is of God’s choosing. The ten lepers acknowledged this when they said, ***“Have pity on us.”***

All ten lepers did well to turn toward Jesus in their time of trouble. All ten did even better when they turned away from Jesus to go to the priest.

**III. The Third Turn for the Better**

But the final turn was negotiated by only one of the lepers: ***“One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him”*** (15-16).

This leper comes back, carrying on, praising God. What a scene! I love it! I love the joy. I love the hope. I love the feeling of life restored. And I am certain Jesus loved it. If I had been one of the disciples, my eyes would have been riveted on this man returning with healing and happiness. But you know what would have been the best thing in the world to see? Jesus’ face. I wish that we knew what his face looked like at this moment.

You know how you feel when you give someone the gift they always wanted, and they thank you again and again, and just can’t stop saying thank you? You know how you feel then? Well, I am not sure, but I am guessing that is how Jesus felt. And I wish the story stopped right here.

But Jesus, in the middle of this joyful moment, did not remain joyful. It is a testimony of how badly our not finding time for Jesus in our lives—I’m not quite sure how to say this—how badly it makes him feel. Because it is sin. Even in the midst of the joy of this one leper who returned, nine did not thank God. And it was a weight upon Jesus.

We aren’t told whether these nine were unbelievers who were just using Jesus, or maybe they were true believers, like us, who sinned by not bring their thanks to God for their blessings. Whether they were believers or not actually is not important for this point.

But when we, blessed by God, take lightly our responsibility to thank and worship our God regularly, consider Jesus’ reaction to the nine. I am sure they had family waiting for them. Their lives were full of new and unexpected opportunity. Yes, yes, they were now very busy men. But at this moment of greatest blessing in their lives, they just didn’t have the time anymore to turn around that third time, the turn of thanks.

The believer realizes that in every difficulty of our lives, God would have us turn three times: first, a turn seeking help in him; second, a turn to obediently listen to him; third, a turn to thank God.

Or maybe easier to remember than all of that is a three part Bible passage some of us memorized long, long ago where God says, *“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me”* (Psalm 50:15). Amen.

1. Matthew Henry Commentary [↑](#footnote-ref-1)