

October 13, 2019
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 17:11-19

As Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem, he traveled through Samaria and Galilee. As he was entering a village, ten lepers met him. They stood at a distance from him and raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!" And when he saw them, he said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." As they were going they were cleansed. And one of them, realizing he had been healed, returned, glorifying God in a loud voice; and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus said in reply, "Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?" Then he said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you."

BACKGROUND:

In the gospel from last week, the disciples asked for greater faith. In response, Jesus told a parable that likened faith to the smallest of seeds, the mustard seed. Today's gospel directly follows last week's text, and it continues to focus on faith, this time the faith of ten lepers.

The Babylonian Exile (587-537 B.C.) was a very difficult time for the Hebrew people. They were forced to leave their homeland, their places of worship, and especially the temple in Jerusalem. They wondered why the God who had freed them from slavery, led them through the desert, helped them defeat their enemies, and helped them become a nation, had now let them become captives to the Babylonians. Ezra, a Hebrew priest, believed God had turned his face from them because they had not kept themselves pure. He blamed their captivity on the fact that some had taken non-Jewish women as wives. In doing so, the boundary between God's holy people and the rest of humanity had been broken. In order to regain God's favor, they needed to reestablish that boundary and maintain purity. As part of the effort to regain their purity, he advocated that non-Jewish women and their heirs be expelled from their community. Those who were expelled became the Samaritans.

The Hebrew people, influence by Ezra and others who adopted his reasoning, became very concerned with maintaining proper boundaries as a way to maintain purity. The traditions that dealt with social, physical, and personal boundaries became even more important. Skin, clothes, and walls of buildings became the focus of greater concern. Leprosy as referenced here was not Hansen's disease, but a skin condition that left the skin flaky or scaly. It was repulsive because the flakes would get on clothing, etc. The flaking broke the boundary of the body of the human person. A group of lepers like the one in this gospel could include both Hebrews and Samaritans, because both were understood to be in the same state, excluded from God's people. As lepers, they forfeited all privileges and status. Law forbade them to enter cities and to participate in normal activities of life.

Jesus' ministry often challenged the clear cultural boundary between the holy people of God and those who were excluded. Luke especially often portrays Jesus reaching across those boundaries to the excluded. Luke knew he was challenging his audience by including this text.

When Jesus encounters these lepers, they keep the appropriate distance and call to him as "Master." Master was a term that only the disciples used for Jesus. Without normal survival relationships, lepers were forced to beg. Here, the lepers do not request alms, but mercy. By asking for mercy, they are asking for what is owed to them to meet their obligations within the community, and as part of God's chosen people. Jesus has already confronted the strict boundaries between the people and the blind, the lame, and sinners. The lepers are in essence saying that it is their turn, that Jesus owes them the same kind of consideration. They are also owed what every other Jew of the day is owed, the right to participate in the religious rituals. For his part, Jesus acknowledges their relationship to him and their relationship to every other Jew of the day. He sends them to the Jewish priests. Priests are the ones who can verify that a cure has taken place and can allow the person to re-

enter normal relations within the community. The ten lepers apparently leave without seeing any change in their condition, and they must trust and hope in Jesus' instruction.

The one who returns is known to be a Samaritan, something that did not matter when he was a leper. He, like the others, acted on faith; trusting that Jesus' instruction would be fulfilled. However, unlike the others, as a Samaritan, he is another kind of outcast and would not be permitted to enter the temple to show himself to the priest, nor to make an appropriate offering in thanks for the cure that has taken place. So, instead, he returns to Jesus to express thanks to the agent of God through whom the healing has taken place. But there is also the fact that in expressing his thanks, the Samaritan has met his obligation to repay Jesus. Usually one waited for an opportunity to repay a good deed with another good deed, such as when the other was in need. However, the Samaritan knows that there will be no other opportunity. He knows that it is highly unlikely that he will ever encounter Jesus again.

Those who are hearing this narrative understand Jesus' point. This Samaritan is no better or worse a person than the other nine. They are all the same. They were all lepers. Being cured of their illness has not changed who they really are. The others are now free to join in the religious practices of the community and be included among God's chosen people. The Samaritan is still officially excluded and is seen as unworthy to be counted among God's chosen. Jesus' last statement to him declares openly what all who have heard the story know in their hearts. God, who in his mercy was present to him as a leper, is also present to him as a Samaritan.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Has there been a period in your own life when you felt like you were an outcast, or were being treated as though you were one?
2. Who would you count among the outcasts?
3. Have you experienced places or situations where being an outcast did not matter?
4. Presumably Jesus did not restore leprosy to the nine that did not return to give thanks. What does that suggest to you?
5. What difference did returning to give thanks make in the life the Samaritan?
6. What difference does being thankful make in your life?
7. Can you take some time to talk with God personally about the things for which you are most grateful, about your desire to live life in a spirit of gratitude, or about your struggle to be thankful?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for October 13, 2019, the Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Naaman plunged into the Jordan seven times at the word of Elisha, the man of God. His flesh became clean of his leprosy. Naaman returned to Elisha and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel. Please accept a gift from your servant." Elisha replied, "As the Lord lives whom I serve, I will not take it;" Naaman said: "If you will not accept, please let me, your servant, have two mule-loads of earth, for I will no longer offer holocaust or sacrifice to any other god except to the Lord."

*The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.
Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done wondrous deeds;
his right hand has won victory for him.
The Lord has made his salvation known, he has revealed his justice.
He has remembered his faithfulness toward the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God.
Sing joyfully to the Lord, all you lands: break into song; sing praise.*

Beloved: Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David: such is my gospel, for which I am suffering, to the point of chains, like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore, I bear with everything for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus. This saying is trustworthy: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we persevere, we shall also reign with him. But if we deny him, he will deny us. If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.

As Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem, he traveled through Samaria and Galilee. As he was entering a village, ten lepers met him. They stood at a distance and raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." As they were going they were cleansed. One of them, realizing he had been healed, returned, glorifying God; and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus said in reply, "Ten were cleansed. Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?" Then he said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you."

Excerpts from 2 Kings 5:14-17; Psalm 98:1-4; 2 Timothy 2:8-13; and Luke 17:11-19