

Luke 17:11-19

Wholeness

I am asked from time to time about the difference between the American Baptists and the Southern Baptists. The general public has no way to know the difference. I would be willing to bet that many baptists also do not know. I am always quick to explain in historical terms that the American Baptists are the old Northern Baptists and that the two groups split over very predictable Civil War era issues. As a matter of fact, the issue was slavery. Many of the baptists in the North were abolitionists while many of the baptists in the South were slaveowners. The majority of baptists at the time were in the North and they could outvote their Southern counterparts. They made a rule that no slaveholders would be appointed as missionaries. So in 1845 the baptists in the South formed their own convention and were able to support their own missionaries. Down through the years after the Civil War the Southern Baptists grew much larger than the Northern Baptists. This is the historical difference.

I might also have added to the obvious geographical difference the ABCUSA and the SBC are different in the same way The New York Yankees and The Cleveland Indians are different. Both are baseball teams. But they are not the same team; they do not have the same players or coaches or organizations or cities or stadiums. ABCUSA is currently promoting

foreign missions through the World Missions Offering (WMO) which will support missionaries associated with International Ministries. The SBC has its own International Mission Board and will take up the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering to support their missionaries. They are the same. But they are different. You get the idea. I mention it partly because it is WMO month and partly because I think it is important to understand our denominational identity and connections. It also serves as an example of something not generally known. That is, most people who are not baptist would not know this history and many baptists are not familiar with it.

Well and Lesser Known

Other things are more widely known. Most people know about popular television shows like NCIS or The Big Bang Theory. Most people about Kleenex and Coca-Cola and McDonalds. I would like to think that most Americans know about the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but I am not sure. Surely most people know about Lebron James and Michael Jordan.

In the same way, some bible stories are more well-known and some less. Some of the well-known stories are the Parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son; David and Goliath and Noah's Ark; the Exodus, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection. Examples of

the lesser-known stories are Ananias and Sapphira, Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, even Ruth and Esther; one would not expect the a general audience to be familiar with them. Somewhere among the lesser-known stories is the story of the Ten Lepers whose leprosy is healed by Jesus, but only one of whom was thoughtful enough to express gratitude.

The Ten Lepers

There are many angles one could pursue in the interpretation of this story. The focus could be on the healing power of Jesus, his ability and his willingness to see the suffering of others, exercise compassion, and miraculously take away the source of their pain.

Or, the focus could be on the religious significance that leprosy held for people in that time and place and the exclusion from their faith community and its practices that they suffered; the way in which they were excluded and condemned.

The story makes a wonderful challenge about ingratitude with only one of those who was helped returning to offer thanks. This sermon could quite easily be about Thanksgiving.

Also challenging is the way Jesus crossed over cultural barriers because he felt deeply for people on the level

of their humanity, people who had been disenfranchised. In the narrow sense, disenfranchisement refers to the denial of the right to vote, which represents the participation in the political life of the community. But it makes sense to broaden our understanding to include exclusion from economic, educational, and religious structures as well. Jesus always favored the disenfranchised people. We do well to keep that in mind. We ourselves are among the most *enfranchised* people, especially middle-class people, who have ever lived. We do well to keep that in mind too.

One of the barriers Jesus overcomes is the prejudice and rivalry between Jews and Samaritans. To tell a story where the Samaritan is the hero is provocative.

All of these would make good sermon topics and by mentioning them I let them work their homiletic power. I am none-the-less looking for a larger gospel message.

Cleansed, Healed, Saved

We find the larger gospel message in the progression of words Jesus uses in his interaction with these ten people. First of all he sends them to the priest cleansed. The idea of cleansing has less to do with physical health than with ceremonial purity. Their

leprosy made them unclean, thus excluded from the spiritual life of the people. Cleansing restored them.

And while they were on the way they were healed, which is more of a medical term and refers to actual physical relief from the disease. All ten were cleansed and healed, which are perhaps opposite sides of the same coin. But they are both this-worldly things. Jesus has something quite different to say to the one who in grateful acknowledgment came back to thank Jesus. Jesus accepts his gratitude as an expression of his faith and tells him his faith has saved him, literally given him life, made him whole. He was healed not only of a skin condition but also of a spiritual condition which had robbed his life of fulfillment.

Wholeness

Wholeness means health, every facet of life in harmony, operating as it should. Wholeness means not only physical health, but also mental, psychological, emotional, and relational health.

Part of what it means to be human is to desire wholeness. Another part of what it means to be human is to be aware of a lack of wholeness. One does not have to be a leper or a Samaritan to know that lack. In the case of this one Samaritan leper we discover that healing the body is not the same thing as healing the

life. In pity, Jesus attacked the physical ailment. When his compassion was noticed and received in faith that there was a healing of the soul.

At some level there is no difference between a Southern Baptist and an American Baptist except a superficial one, just as there is no between a Samaritan and a Jew; we are all human beings trying to be whole and not succeeding. That gives us common ground with each other.

In a sense we are all like the ten lepers. In an encounter with Christ we have been sent to the priest healed and cleansed. Whether we are saved is another matter. That question depends on whether we are willing by faith to enter into a relationship with the one who has healed and cleansed us. That faith has brought us here into this strange fellowship with each other when in some cases we have nothing else in common.

That gratefulness stretches across the divide that God has reached across and offers a hope that nothing else does, certainly not politics. The faith that sees that God's Grace has addressed us simply as human beings, offers the wholeness and health we long for and chase throughout our lives. It gives life and health. It saves our souls.

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