

Luke 17:11-19
October 13, 2019

The Other Nine

In my seminary leadership classes we were confronted, if I remember accurately, with the concept of *dis*-satisfiers, that is, the elements of church life that produce a negative response if the church fails, but if the church succeeds, cannot produce a positive one. In other words, they can result in dis-satisfaction, but not satisfaction.

For instance, the parking lot and restrooms are dis-satisfiers (most facilities are). If they are adequate, they go unnoticed, but if they are not done well, they produce dis-satisfaction. To put it this way, people will not generally come to a church *because* the parking is adequate, but they may decide not to return if they can't find a parking place. I mention this not to speak of what our possible dis-satisfiers may be, but as an illustration to help us understand our text.

Thanksgiving and the Coming of Fall

The coming of fall, even in today's industrialized economy, in which the produce of the land is available all year round, and there is always food at the grocery store, nonetheless invokes thoughts of thanksgiving; harvest festivals, pumpkins, and the colors of the season. By this I don't merely mean the national holiday celebrated near the end of November with the consuming of turkey and family gatherings and football games, but of the thing itself, the attitude of

the heart that gives the holiday its name . . . ,
Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is the acknowledgement and appreciation of having been given a good gift. Its most powerful expressions refer to the realization that the gift, is both *most needed and beyond reach*.

Life is such a gift, and the promise of eternal life, as well as mercy and love, and not to be too cliché, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It goes against our culturally induced self-esteem to admit that such things are beyond reach, and against the spirit of the times that they are most needed.

In our time, it is the self-made person, the hardy, tough people who, "pull themselves up by their own boot straps," the ones who use their own ingenuity and resources to accomplish autonomy and independence, wealth and success, that are most admired.

This value is a false one. It is false not only because it is unrealistic for most people even to feign this kind of success, but because even those who can feign it must involve themselves in monumental self-deceit. There is really very little in life that is beyond the givenness of things.

The Ten Lepers

The text today illustrates the point well. It is the well-known story of the ten lepers, who came to Jesus for cleansing. To be a leper in ancient society meant to be an outcast, not only because leprosy could refer to a number of contagious diseases, at least one of which was fatal, but also because by law it excluded people from participation in the faith community. Those afflicted with these various conditions of the skin were outcasted at best, abandoned to die at worst.

In order to be restored to life in the community one was required to be cleared by a priest, who could vouch that the skin disease had been cured, and pronounce a person “clean,” and thus acceptable. In this story, there were ten who came to Jesus for cleansing, and they were sent away to the priest for authentication, having been given back their lives.

It was one notorious leper who returned to Jesus to express gratitude, who was commended and is the hero of the story, and the focus of many sermons. And, of course, he was a Samaritan, going along with the challenging notion in the gospels that great faith was found outside the family of faith.

The failure of gratitude on the part of the others prompted the response from Jesus, “where are the other nine?”

The temptation is always to focus on the one thankful Samaritan, and this is good and right, but just this

once let our attention be turned to the example of the other nine, who accepted the gift but did not return thanks. Nothing much is said about them except by inference, and that inference is important.

Healing and Wholeness

To begin, look at the last statement Jesus makes to the one leper who came back in gratitude. “Rise and go, your faith has *made you well*.” I will take a few liberties with this word, because it is the same as the word for salvation (literally, “your faith has saved you.”)

The implication here is of a comprehensive wholeness that reaches far beyond the curing of the skin diseases. It is one thing to be cured, it is another to be well, for wellness implies the whole of life, not merely the health of the body, but of the soul, and of the relationships that are entailed by life in a community. Wholeness is more than physical well-being.

How many times have we met people who suffered from some illness or disability who we found healthier, more at peace, better adjusted, than those without? It is also hard not to see the difference between the superficial nature of skin conditions and the subterranean depths of the life of the soul.

Gratitude is necessary for wholeness, and the implication, tragic though it may be, is that the other nine were merely cured of a skin condition, but not made whole, because they were too self-centered to even think of being grateful.

Maybe they just forgot in the moment and remembered later. But it raises a question for all of us; what measure of wholeness have we missed because we have failed to acknowledge, like the other nine, the giftedness of our lives? Failed to return to the giver our thanksgiving? It is a challenging question because I am sure we have all tried with some measure of success to *be* thankful.

Leprosy

Having an irritating or fatal skin disease is a dissatisfier, like not being able to find a parking space. One notices if there is no cure, but if there is, or if there is no disease in the first place, human beings have a powerful ability not to notice. The cure, by itself, tempts one to live as if there never was a disease, and can't, by itself, produce salvation.

Salvation is another matter, one that involves the attitudes of the heart. Perhaps more, but at least as much as any other, thankfulness is involved with all-around wholeness and health. And thankfulness is a matter of faith.

Now leprosy has become a metaphor for something superficial, now I do not want to belittle superficial things as insignificant, but things on the surface of our lives that cause one to feel like a misfit. There are other kinds of things that leprosy may be said to represent.

Doubt, despair, anxiety, fear, low self-esteem,

anger, malice, the inability to forgive excessive selfishness, lack of empathy, lack of compassion, denial, the ability to live in a reality without the awareness of it

These and more can to one degree or another be cured, sometimes God brings liberation . . . but when there is a failure to acknowledge the gift and the giver, all one is, is cured, like the other nine, never whole, never well, shall i say, never saved?

And these are just illustrations, examples for conversation. In truth, because all of life is grace, any failure of gratitude is in keeping with behavior of the other nine.

But, of course, this does not have to be so, for we can always stop ourselves in our faithlessness, and in our faithfulness act in a way that follows the example of the one, who merely took a little time to express gratitude, and was not only cured, but saved.

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Life is such a gift, and the promise of eternal life, as well as mercy and love . . .

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