

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 16, 2006
Luke 17:11-19

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Learn a Lesson in Faith from a Leper

1. Faith knows where to turn
2. Faith knows whom to thank

NIV Luke 17:11 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance¹³ and 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.¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him-- and he was a Samaritan.¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?"¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Fellow Christians,

The cover of last week's TIME magazine shows a front-end view of a Rolls Royce, but in place of the usual "Flying Lady" hood ornament is a cross. On the cover is this question: "Does God want you to be rich?" Inside you can read about a well-known television preacher whose answer to that question, if you'd substitute the word "prosperous" for "rich," is "Yes." This preacher says that God wants you to live *your best life now* and that your dreams can come true by the power of faith. He says it was his wife's faith that got them the dream house they're living in now and credits his faith with getting him perks like an upgrade from coach to business class on a plane trip. In other words, if you've got faith, then just name it and claim it.

Did Jesus encourage such thinking with his words in the last verse of today's Gospel lesson? He said, "*Rise and go; your faith has made you well*"? Is it true that with a strong enough faith we can not only be cured of illnesses, but become prosperous and live in dream homes and say good-bye to financial problems? Let's take a closer look at what happened there in order to **Learn a Lesson in Faith from a Leper**.

1. Faith knows where to turn

It says here, "*Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had*

leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us.'" It's hard to exaggerate the impact of contracting leprosy. It was truly a dread disease. There was no cure for leprosy in those days. It was debilitating and disfiguring. The nerve damage caused by the disease resulted in numbness in the hands and feet, which led to injuries and even the loss of fingers and toes. In addition, because leprosy, though not highly contagious, *is* contagious, Old Testament law stated that lepers were to live in isolation from the general population. Furthermore, they keep their distance from healthy people and warn them of their leprosy by calling out, "Unclean! Unclean!" (Lev. 13:45) Most people took a wide berth around them. Not Jesus. His route to Jerusalem led him to a pre-planned rendezvous with these ten lepers. When Jesus came near, they called out to him and begged for mercy. They knew that Jesus healed people, so they called out to him.

This is the first thing we learn here about faith. Faith knows where to turn. God offered an invitation for us to turn to him when he said, "**Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will honor me.**" (Ps. 50:15) Time after time here in Luke's Gospel we see people doing just that—and they're not disappointed. It seems so elementary: Turn to Jesus when you're in trouble. But earlier in this Gospel Jesus had reminded his hearers of what had happened in the time of the prophet Elisha. He said, "**And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.**" (4:27) Only Naaman the Syrian captain was cleansed of leprosy because Naaman was the only leper who believed that the LORD's prophet could heal him.

Why are we sometimes so slow to turn to Jesus? We're not unbelievers. So what is it? Do we forget God's invitation? Are we too proud or too busy trying to work out our own solutions? Sometimes it seems we'll try nearly everything at our disposal except prayer. The result of our reluctance to turn to Jesus, though, is that we forfeit the peace we might have enjoyed and bear a lot of needless pain, all because we didn't carry everything to God in prayer. James says in his letter, "**You do not have, because you do not ask God.**" (4:2) Why live in such self-imposed deprivation when Jesus has promised, "**Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened**"? (Matt. 7:7-8) Our Father in heaven *does* desire to give good gifts to those who ask him.

But it should be noted that God isn't just some celestial ATM. "Swipe the magnetic strip and enter the correct pass code and out pops whatever you've requested." That makes Jesus little more than a heavenly concierge. You know—those helpful fellows in the lobby of fancy hotels. Need a rental car? Need directions to a restaurant? Need tickets for a ballgame? Just ask the concierge. He'll handle it for you. But I don't want God to respond like that. Since he knows all things and since he loves me immeasurably, I would rather

leave it up to him to give me what he knows is best for me rather than dictating to him how he ought to answer my prayers. That's where "Thy will be done" comes in.

There's a point to be made in the order of events here. Listen for it: "*When Jesus saw them, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were cleansed.*" The priests were to be the arbiters. They were to decide whether someone who had leprosy had actually been cured. But at the point that Jesus tells the lepers to go and show themselves to the priests, the lepers had not yet been cleansed. It wasn't until they started out to see the priests that they were cleansed. It took a little faith to head off to see the priests when nothing about the white spots on your skin or your numb feet or your missing digits had changed yet. But these lepers took Jesus at his word and went.

That's something to learn about faith, too. Faith means taking Jesus at his word. It's sometimes the case that what Jesus asks us to believe, or what he tells us to do, doesn't make sense to us. Remember Naaman? When he went to Elisha, Elisha didn't even come out to meet him. The prophet just sent a messenger to tell Naaman to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman balked at doing that because he had pictured it differently. He imagined that the prophet would come out and wave his hand over the spot of leprosy and cure him. It was only at the urging of his servants that Naaman finally went and washed in the Jordan and got cleansed. What do you suppose would have happened with those ten lepers if they had said, "Look, Jesus, we're not fools. You haven't cleansed us yet. We're not going to see the priests until you make us clean"? But they took Jesus at his word.

It can be difficult to take Jesus at his word, especially when it seems that the Lord's answer to our persistent prayers appears to be "No." "No," God sometimes says, "I'm not going to change that, not going to heal that, not going to solve that—not now, maybe not ever." Contrary to what some television preachers would have you believe, God, almighty and loving though he is, does sometimes allow his beloved people to live in something less than their dream house and to grapple long-term with health problems, money problems and family problems. Sometimes you even have to fly coach! But those who take God at his word will not be disappointed in the end. God will use our afflictions, our real or imagined deprivations, in his plan to guide us safely to the home Jesus prepared for us in heaven. This remains true: God, who spared not his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will surely, along with Jesus, give us all things.

It was faith that caused the ten lepers to turn to Jesus for cleansing in the first place; it was faith that caused one of the ten lepers to turn back to Jesus when, on the way to see the priests, he saw that he'd been cleansed. By doing so, he shows us that faith knows whom to thank.

2. Faith knows whom to thank

Luke reports, *“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—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, ‘Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’”*

I don’t know why the other nine didn’t come back to thank Jesus. They had to have been overwhelmed with joy that they had been healed. Maybe they were so intent on getting to see the priests that they didn’t want to turn back. Maybe they thought they’d see Jesus and thank him later. But this incident illustrates how rare thankfulness can sometimes be.

But that wasn’t some isolated incident. Jesus has to deal routinely with our ingratitude. It’s not just that we too often forget to say thank-you for the blessings he gives us. More than that, we can at times begin to believe that the good things we enjoy are solely the product of our own hard work or intelligence. We leave the Giver of these good gifts out of the equation entirely. Or we respond to his many kindnesses with continual complaining about things or people or circumstances. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we test God’s patience with our ingratitude.

If we see something of ourselves in those nine lepers who didn’t return to give thanks, then the proper course is to repent, first, by acknowledging the sin of our ingratitude and complaining. God would be entirely just if he suspended all our blessings as punishment. But this is the God who justifies the wicked. He declares the ungrateful and the complainers not guilty, too. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, we have been forgiven. God’s mercy in forgiving us and restoring us gives us just as much reason as the leprous man to throw ourselves at Jesus’ feet and thank him. Although he was angry with us, through Jesus his anger has been turned away and he has comforted us. God’s mercy has melted our thankless hearts and moves us to praise him.

If you lived in a certain oceanside town in Florida in the late 1960s and early 1970s, you’d have seen, day after, an elderly man taking a bucket of shrimp down to the pier. As he approached the pier, the seagulls would flock around him, eager for the shrimp. They’d land on his shoulders and his head and settle on the ground all around him. The elderly man was Eddie Rickenbacker, former race car driver and World War I flying ace. You see, during World War II, Rickenbacker, no longer active military, was sent to the Pacific Theater on behalf of the U.S. military to conduct some reviews. On one trip, he and eight other men set out in a B-17 for an island in the Pacific. But an unexpected tailwind blew them past their destination. Lost and running out of fuel, the pilot ditched the plane in the ocean and all nine men got into life rafts. They drifted for more than three weeks in those rafts. Death seemed to be a real possibility. But one day as Rickenbacker leaned back to sleep, he felt something land on the raft. Hardly daring to move, he opened his eyes and saw a seagull. He grabbed for it and caught it. Then he divided the raw meat of that gull with the eight other men

and used the innards of the bird as fish bait. He and his companions survived, thanks in large part to the arrival of that seagull. Now you know why Eddie Rickenbacker spent so many of the days of his retirement feeding shrimp to seagulls. He was thanking—no, not the gulls—but God who spared his life. How are you thanking God for sparing your life for all eternity?

Now let's go back to what Jesus said to the thankful former leper: "Your faith has made you well." Did Jesus mean to say that the man's faith alone had brought about this cure? Certainly not. It's not our faith that does great things, but the object of our faith, Jesus. Faith is the hand that receives what Jesus has promised us. As the leper showed us, faith knows where to turn. Faith takes Jesus at his word. And faith knows whom to thank. So do you. Amen.