

Rev. Gregory Gibbons  
Lola Park Lutheran Church  
Redford, MI 48239

Luke 17:11-18

CHRIST RESTORES US TO FULL FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

INI

There are people who like to go to scary movies. I'm generally not one of them. I have seen some scary movies and one that I remember very vividly was when I was a boy and I went to see Ben Hur. Judah Ben Hur's mother and sister had become lepers and he had to search for them. Leprosy was a horrible disease. Physically it infected the body, bringing a hideous disfigurement. It was infectious. A person's flesh would rot and fingers and toes would self-amputate. You can imagine that it was not pretty and it wouldn't smell very good either. Those who had leprosy would have to live by themselves in leper colonies. There was no known cure.

There was something worse than the physical pain lepers had to deal with on a daily basis. It was the emotional pain of separation from their families and community. In Israel community was everything. People were part of a family, a clan, a tribe. You had a feeling of identity, of self-worth. You knew who you were. Leprosy made that impossible. You could no longer hug your mother or father for fear of infecting them with the same disease. You could no longer get together with the family for holidays and other celebrations. You were by yourself. And you were also cut off from the worship life of Israel. You could not participate in the worship at the local synagogue or attend the feasts in Jerusalem. You were cut off from the fellowship of your fellow Jews and your family. What a horrible thing that must have been!

Leprosy has often been used in the Scripture to picture another disease, a disease known as sin. I doubt that many of us will ever be infected with the disease known as leprosy, but we are all sinners. We were born with this disease. We got it from our parents who got it from their parents all the way back to Adam and Eve. We in turn pass it on to our children and grandchildren. We see this disease show itself in many ways, in our thoughts, our words and our actions. It shows itself in greed, envy, jealousy, lust, anger, hatred and thanklessness. It shows itself in our love of self. It shows itself in our lies and deceptions, both to others and to ourselves. Sin also isolates us from others. Friendships are destroyed by gossip, petty jealousies and unkind words. Marriages are destroyed by self-centeredness, lack of love and forgiveness and power struggles. Families are destroyed by lack of trust and disrespect.

Worst of all, sin separates us from God. God wants us to be in fellowship with him. Sin makes us want to stay away. When Adam and Eve sinned against God they ran away and tried to hide. They knew that we cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. We are unclean and like the lepers of Biblical times we must admit that.

The lepers knew that they were not dealing from a position of strength. They could not demand anything from Jesus. They had nothing to offer Jesus. They knew their problem. They looked to Jesus as the one who could help. They begged for help. They cried for mercy.

Do you see how the Divine Service mirrors the action of the lepers? We come before the Lord each week, acknowledging our sin. Like the lepers, we have nothing to offer God but our sin. We acknowledge that we are dying slowly and daily and that our disease is fatal and that there is no known cure that man can come up with. We plead for God's mercy and ask that he will not treat us as our sins deserve. The first thing we see in the liturgy is distance. We acknowledge that we are far away from God. We confess our sin, asking God for forgiveness. In the Kyrie, we pray the same words spoken by the lepers: "Lord, have mercy!"

What does Jesus do as he sees the plight of these poor men? He does not run away because their disease makes him feel uneasy. He does not avoid defiling himself with ceremonial uncleanness like the Pharisees and teachers

of the Law. He will heal them. He will cleanse them. That was one of the miracles predicted of the mighty Messiah. He would cleanse the lepers.

This was not the first time that Jesus had cleansed a person from leprosy. Both Matthew and Mark speak of Jesus cleansing a single leper. He told that man to go and show himself to the priests just as he did here. There was a major difference. The first time he had cleansed the leper and then given the command. This time, as Jesus gave the command, the men were still lepers. He put their faith to the test. They might have thought that it was crazy to go to Jerusalem some 70 miles away. No healing that they could see had taken place. Yet they would trust the word of Jesus. They would go to Jerusalem in spite of what their human reason would tell them.

“And as they went, they were cleansed.” We don’t know how far they got. A mile, five miles, more, less? It really doesn’t matter. Nor do we know how they noticed the change. Did they feel the cleansing going on in their own bodies? Did they look at one another and say, “Hey, you’re not a leper anymore!?” Once again, it doesn’t matter. The important thing is that they were cleansed. Jesus spoke the word. They trusted him. Their leprosy was now gone.

There was only one thing left to do. They were to go to the temple, show themselves to the priests and offer the appropriate sacrifices so that they could return to the community of Israel. That is what the Old Testament law said that they were to do. You could imagine the excitement that the lepers felt at the thought of finally rejoining family and friends and returning to a normal way of life once again.

It was a long journey to Jerusalem and the cleansing rite by the priests and the necessary sacrifices would take a minimum of two weeks. This was no two minute checkup. Take the time to read Leviticus, Chapter 14. Lepers would have to stay outside the temple area for a week and then they had to stay inside the temple area for a week. Jesus came to fulfill the Law. He would send these men to the priests to fulfill the Law, but there was something more. He wanted those men to go to the place of sacrifice and offer themselves as testimony that a corresponding spiritual healing also took place. The priests would have to confirm that the lepers had indeed been cleansed and that the person who had cleansed them was Jesus.

The leprosy of our sin does not push Jesus away from us either. He speaks the word of absolution: “Be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven you!” No matter how disgusting your sins, no matter how disfigured you look, Jesus has taken your sins into his own body. He died for them so that you can receive the healing you need.

Nine of the lepers would make that journey to Jerusalem. But “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.” The ten lepers were happy to journey to Jerusalem with the expectation that they would be cleansed, but after the cleansing, only one leper was willing to return and give glory to God, God in the person of Jesus, whose presence in the world and whose sacrifice on the cross would put an end to the temple and all the sacrifices. The chief irony is this: the one who returns is a foreigner, a Samaritan, an outcast. He is the one who responds in faith.

So often this lesson is simply presented as an example of people who were ungrateful. This serves as the Gospel lesson for Thanksgiving Day. Thanksgiving Day is not part of the Church Year. It is an American festival, not a church holy day. Thankfulness should be part of our lives every day. If we simply look at this lesson and say that the nine should have been more thankful, we’ve missed the major point.

The nine did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They went to Jerusalem to show themselves to the priests. They wanted to be restored to fellowship. They wanted to be in conformity to the Law of Moses.

The Samaritan realized something else. He came back and praised God. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. This was the posture of worship. This man realized that he did not need to go to the priests. Jesus was the priest. He did not need to go to the Temple. Jesus was the Temple of God. He could give praise to God because he recognized that Jesus was God. He saw what the other lepers did not see. They looked to Jesus as one who could perform miracles which he did, but they did not necessarily look to him as the very Son of God.

It is implied in Jesus' words that the lepers who did not return were Jewish. They did not realize the significance of what had happened. They did not realize that God's kingdom had arrived in Jesus. The Jews had every advantage. They had the promises given to Abraham and the patriarchs. They had the Law. They had the Temple. They had the Scriptures that pointed to Christ. Yet they did not recognize him for who he was. John says in his gospel, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." Yes, once again here are the two groups that Jesus has confronted throughout his ministry: the outcasts who receive him by faith and the religious establishment which rejects him.

The Samaritan was not only healed of leprosy, he was healed from blindness as well. He could clearly see who Jesus was. He saw the Lord. He saw the Son of God. He saw the true Temple and the true High Priest. He saw that he an outcast, not only because he was a leper, but also a Samaritan, was restored to fellowship with God. He did not have to go to the Temple where sacrifices for sin would have to be made over and over again. This was a better temple where there would be one sacrifice made for all time.

This would foreshadow the entire New Testament time when the Gentiles would be engrafted into the Church. This was foretold by the prophets and fulfilled by the Prophet. This man would become one of many witnesses for Christ. He had been cleansed from leprosy.

And we have been cleansed as well. We have our sins washed away in the holy waters of Baptism. There we have put on Christ. We are part of God's family. Like the Prodigal Son we have been restored to the family, given the ring of a son and the sandals of a free man. God has killed the fattened calf and invited the community to celebrate.

The story of the ten lepers is our story. God has had mercy on us. The one leper who returns, is by the grace of God, who we are called to be. We have been cleansed from the leprosy of sin. We are clean, forgiven, holy and free. Thank him for his cleansing! AMEN.