



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity Galatians 5:16-24 & St. Luke 17:11-19

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I want to begin this morning with our Gospel lesson from Luke 17. The story begins in verse 11, where we're told that Jesus was setting off with his disciples for his last trip to Jerusalem. The Passover was coming and it was time for Jesus to fulfil his saving mission. And St. Luke tells us that as they were passing through a village on the border between Samaria and Galilee they were approached by ten men—ten lepers—who called out from a distance: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

These were social outcasts. They were forced to live in camps on the outskirts of the towns. People feared them. If for some reason a leper had to venture near healthy people, he was required to call out "Unclean! Unclean! Make way for the Unclean!" To be a leper was to bear a two-fold curse. It was an ugly disease and today we tend to think of it strictly in clinical terms: the discomfort and the pain; the fact that these people were forced to live apart from everyone in poverty and squalor; and the fact that the disease (or diseases) they knew as leprosy in those days was contagious. But there was more to it than simply being a physical disease. To be a leper was to carry around a terribly *spiritual* stigma too. To be leper was to be perpetually ritually unclean. Lepers were outside the religious community of Israel. Because they were ritually unclean, lepers couldn't enter the temple, but for the same reason, they also couldn't be near other people. To touch someone or something that was unclean was to become unclean yourself. So when a leper walked through town calling out "Unclean! Unclean!" he wasn't just warning people about the clinical nature of his disease—"Keep clear! You don't want what I've got!"—he was also warning people to stay away lest they become ritually defiled. Chances were that if you accidentally bumped into

a leper you weren't going to catch leprosy yourself, but whether you got the disease or not, you'd still be left unclean and have to go through the rituals of purification. In the meantime you'd be cut off yourself from other people and from the temple and any other religious activities.

Because of all this, leprosy became associated with sin. In a very real sense it was a lot like an ancient equivalent to HIV. The easiest way to get HIV is through illicit sex or drug use, but that doesn't mean that everyone gets it because they've sinned. I knew a man who contracted HIV through a blood transfusion, but that didn't mean that people didn't connect him with the usual social stigma associated with HIV. Leprosy was very similar to that in Jesus' time. People made certain assumptions about lepers and there wasn't much compassion for them. Not only were they feared because of the disease they carried, but most people assumed that lepers were sick because they had sinned and deserved it.

And so ten of these men heard that Jesus was coming through town. They had obviously heard how he had healed other people and they hoped that maybe he could heal them and in faith they came and called out: "Jesus! We've heard how merciful you are. Show us your mercy. Heal our disease!" And Jesus heard them and he had mercy on them and told them: "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

We might think that's kind of weird. When Jesus healed other people he often healed them right away. But not always. This is one of those cases where men came to him in faith—they wouldn't have come asking for healing if they hadn't believed he could do it—but Jesus asked them to do something to confirm their faith. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. A man or woman who had had leprosy would be examined by a priest and it was only the priest who could declare a leper clean. We see the faith that these men had, because even though they weren't healed yet, they ran off to see the local priest. They trusted that Jesus would heal them. And that's exactly what happened. As they went off toward the priest's house they were healed.

At this point you would think that these ten men would show some real gratitude. It wasn't just that they were healed from

some minor disease—not even just a major disease. Their healing meant not just physical health, but restoration from being impoverished outcasts to being able to return to their families and friends and to the worshipping community. I wonder myself which was worse: the disease or the stigma associated with it. So this was a big deal. And yet St. Luke tells us that only *one* of them—one who happened to be a Samaritan, one of the enemies of the Jews and one who was considered a religious heretic and compromiser—only that one turned and came back to thank Jesus. Luke says "he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks."

And Jesus asked him, "Weren't there ten of you? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Jesus made a point of this one man's true gratitude to the disciples and to the other people who were no doubt around. He knew that there was more to this man's faith than just his having heard about Jesus as a healer of *physical* diseases. Jesus could see into this man's heart and knew that he had come, knowing him to be the true Saviour. Jesus knew that this man came to him not just for relief from the physical consequences of his sin, but for healing—for forgiveness—of his sins that had caused the physical pain and suffering. And so Jesus says to him, "Get up and go your way. Go show yourself to the priest so that he and everyone else can see that you've been healed. Your faith has saved you." The ESV says, "Your faith has made you *well*." The word that Luke uses, though, is the word for "save". The other nine men were healed. Jesus gave them something good. To be healed of leprosy was great. But what they received didn't fix their *real* problem. They were still sinners in need of forgiveness. This man, though, was truly and fully saved. As his leprosy faded from his body, he realized that there was more to Jesus than his just being a faith healer. This was God Incarnate. This was a man who could forgive sins and heal him of his deeper and eternal spiritual problem. That's why he turned back to give thanks, and as he did so Jesus confirmed that spiritual healing the same way the priest would later confirm his physical healing.

And that leper who came back to thank Jesus is a picture of what it means to be a true follower of Jesus—a true Christian believer. The nine got what they wanted from Jesus and went off to do their own

thing. They showed a profound lack of gratitude. But if you look at the story you can understand why. I don't want to underplay the horribleness of their disease, but what they wanted from Jesus was simply physical relief, and as terrible as leprosy was, that was a shallow request to make of the One who offered them eternal salvation from sin and from sin's consequences. They were happy not to have leprosy anymore, but they were still slaves to sin and they still stood condemned to everlasting damnation when they died. They had a shallow understanding of the Saviour. But the tenth man truly understood what redemption means—and that's why he came back. He knew on some level that he was sinner; he knew he stood condemned; and he knew that Jesus could forgive. In his case the healing from leprosy was like a sacramental seal of his redemption—an outward sign and seal of the inward grace that Jesus applied to him in cleansing him of his sins. Jesus told him to go show himself to the priest, and as he headed off and was healed of his disease he realized that there was more—that he was *truly* well, through and through, in body *and* spirit—and so he turned back to express his gratitude.

As Christians, then, who represents us best? Obviously, it should be the man who came back and thanked Jesus, but if we really look at our lives and how we approach Jesus, I think it's safe to say that a lot of the time we're more like the other nine. I know that's certainly true for me. We see ourselves in those nine men when our prayers are little more than lists of "Gimme, gimme gimme"; when he come to sing songs of thanks and praise on Sunday, but give little thought to Jesus during the week; and when we live our lives for ourselves, continuing on in our sins. I think that last point is where we truly show our lack of gratitude and our shallow understanding of faith and of our Saviour. Jesus tells us that if we love him we will obey his commandments. St. James reminds us that true and saving faith manifests itself in love and good works—in obedience to Jesus. But if we look at our own lives—at our own obedience to Jesus and at the fruit we bear—we often aren't very good at showing Jesus the gratitude that he truly deserves.

St. Paul gets at this in our Epistle from Galatians 5 as he talks about walking in the Spirit. Look at verses 16-18:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

All ten lepers came to Jesus living in the flesh, but one went away walking in the Spirit because of his faith. We come to Jesus living in the flesh too, but through faith in his grace we leave walking in the Spirit—we leave having been made well and saved by faith. And Paul reminds us that there should be a clear contrast between these two ways of life. The desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit are polar opposites—each is against the other—so it shouldn't be very hard to tell if someone is walking in the flesh or walking in the Spirit. It's not that we won't struggle. Walking in the Spirit—walking in the power and grace of Jesus—isn't always easy. We still carry around the desires of the flesh. We've crucified our old man on the cross with Jesus, but sometimes we dig the old man back up out of the grave. Even St. Paul struggled. In Romans 7 he writes about fighting to do the things he knows are right and so easily falling back into doing the things he knows are wrong...but even still, because he was walking in the Spirit, despite his struggles, his life in general was characterized by an overwhelming desire to please God by being obedient to his commandments and by a real and true sense of repentance when he failed.

But again, Paul tells the Galatians that it's easy to tell who's walking in the flesh and who's walking in the Spirit. He goes on in verse 19:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

When I read that it sounds like Paul's describing the first and only fraternity

party I went to in University. It was a bunch of boys and girls away from any kind of authority for the first time in their lives and they went wild, thinking there were no consequences. Frankly, this is all the "fun" stuff—at least until the consequences come home. These are the desires that are deep down in the fallen heart of man and if we don't all engage in all these sins it's only because we know that if we did, we would destroy ourselves and our relationships and be worse off for it. The fact is that even when we avoid some of these sins, we do so for reasons of selfishness. Fallen men and women live for the flesh and we see it in everything they do or that they don't do. And Paul warns us in verse 21:

I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

That's not to say that God won't forgive our sins. Paul's point is that the person who is truly following Christ is going to be walking in the Spirit and striving for purity in his or her life. As Christians we fail sometimes, but if we're truly walking in the Spirit our lives should be characterised by a progressive growth in holiness and a real desire to put our sins behind us. In contrast, if our lives are characterised by sin—and especially by *unrepentant* sin—it means that we're not walking in the Spirit. Again, Jesus said that if we love him—if we feel any sense of gratitude for what he has done for us—we will obey him—or at least we will do our very best to obey, living in the power of his Spirit, and repenting when we fail. But the opposite is just as true: If our lives are characterised by wilful and unrepentant disobedience, we do not love Christ. And that means that we haven't experienced his grace. Think about it. How can a sinner condemned to hell yet redeemed by the very blood of God Incarnate *not* be passionately in love with his Saviour?

When we are in love with our Saviour. When we can sing those words of John Newton, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me" and personally understand them, we can never go on in disobedient living. We can never run off with the nine unthankful lepers and take for granted the death of Jesus on the cross for our sake. If we understand what Jesus has done for us and if we have put

our faith in him, we *will* walk in his Spirit and the difference in how we live our lives will be like night and day. Paul goes on in verses 22-24:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

That's a drastically different set of characteristics than those that Paul described as the "works of the flesh". We need to ask which list characterizes our lives. I think it's important to point out that the fruit of the Spirit go beyond just avoiding the sinful things Paul listed as works of the flesh. I know lots of people who avoid drunkenness or dissensions or sexual immorality for purely practical reasons—it's got nothing to do with pleasing God. They know that being a drunk or starting fights or being sexually immoral all have consequences that they don't want to live with. But friends, that like not speeding on the highway because there's a cop following you. I bet we've all been in that situation. We'd really rather be speeding, but we drive the limit because there's a cop behind us and we don't want a ticket. Not sinning because we don't want to deal with the consequences isn't walking in the Spirit. We all know that in that situation, as soon as the cop pulls off the highway we'll speed up. Walking in the Spirit means actually desiring to do what we know to be right because we want to please God out of love and gratitude. That's why Paul doesn't say, "The fruit of the Spirit is avoiding sexual immorality, avoiding drunkenness, avoiding sorcery, and playing nice with others." No, he actually describes a positive attitude of love, thankfulness, and a real desire for holiness: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Think about that in terms of the cop following you on the highway. You might be doing the right thing, but my guess it there's not much joy or patience in it. When you're angry with someone and the only thing keeping you from lashing out at them is the other people around you, you might be doing the right thing by not lashing out, but chances are there's not

much kindness or gentleness in how you're feeling. You're only doing the right thing because you have to. In contrast, when we're walking in the Spirit and living obediently out of gratitude for the grace of God, we'll be doing the right things because our lives will first be characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. We'll be kind to others, because our lives will be characterized by kindness. We'll do the speed limit because our lives are characterized by patience. We'll avoid drunkenness and sexual immorality because our lives will be defined by self-control and goodness.

That's what true worship is all about. We tend to think of worship in terms of coming on Sunday to sing songs and to hear God's Word and to receive the Lord's Supper—and that's all a part of worship. But that's the corporate equipping part. It's what should be preparing us to be sent out into the world to do the *real* work of worship as we live in thankful obedience the rest of the week. Real worship is living continually before the face of God in ways we know are pleasing to him. Fr. Parsch put it this way: "A Christian especially has reasons to be continually grateful, because he has been deluged with favours by God, his heavenly Father. From the midst of thousands he has been snatched out of the powers of darkness and transferred to the realm of light and grace. We must want to follow with grateful heart all the ways that God marks out for us in the course of our lives, even though we do not understand them and find them very hard."

Friends, that's not only what glorifies God; that's what's going to draw others to Christ. When the world sees us gathering to sing and hear the Word, and receive Communion on Sunday morning, that's not what's going to attract them to Jesus. That's just weird stuff that Christians do when they could be out fishing or playing golf on the weekend. No, what really draws people to Jesus is to see us living our lives through the rest of the week and living our lives differently than they live their own—living in love and good works—precisely because we've experienced the amazing grace of God and our first and greatest desire is to walk in the Spirit and offer our lives, each and every day, as offerings of thanks and praise. That's what it means to be salt and light. That's what it means to be lights

shining in the darkness of the world. That's what it means to show the world the new life we have been given by Jesus.

Let us pray: Father, as we prayed in the collect this morning, grow us in the fruit of your Spirit. Let our lives be characterised by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that we might give you faithful service out of love and gratitude for your grace. Let us live our lives like the man who understood what you had done for him and came back in thanksgiving, not like the other nine who took your grace for granted. Let others see the transforming power of your Spirit at work in our lives, that they might be drawn to you as they see our faithful witness. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.