

Where Are the Nine?
Luke 17:11-19
November 27, 2013
Thanksgiving Eve

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!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. 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?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Are we grateful for all the things God gives us and does for us? Have you ever taken the time to consider all the ways God has blessed your life? Where would we be without the love, grace, and mercy of God? None of us could possibly live long enough on this earth to thank God for all that he has done on our behalf.

Maybe you have some problem in your life that doesn't make you feel like giving thanks. If that's true, you can still give thanks because you don't have to go through that problem alone. You have God and his people to help carry your burden.

Tonight's Gospel reading is all about gratitude and ingratitude. It's about either thanking God or taking God for granted. There are lessons to be learned from the one in this story and there are lessons to be learned from the nine.

The ten men in the text were lepers. The dictionary calls leprosy a "disease caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae* that attacks the skin, flesh, nerves, etc.; it is characterized by nodules, ulcers, white scaly scabs, deformities, and the eventual loss of sensation, and is apparently communicated only after long, close contact."

They were lepers. No one had to tell them they were very sick. They were well aware of their condition. Their skin was a glaring reminder of just how much trouble they were in.

Leprosy made these men outcasts. Not realizing the low contagion level of the disease, society of their day had a phobic reaction to leprosy. By Jewish law, lepers had to remain at least 100 paces away from uninfected people. These men sought out each other's company because that was all they were allowed.

That brings up a lesson we can learn from the ten. As many as nine of this group were Jews. That's why Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priests. We know of at least one Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans hated each other.

So, why was this Samaritan, and maybe others, allowed in with the Jews? Because serious adversity has a way of making people see that, in reality, we are all one race.

When major disaster strikes, all the petty differences disappear. Race, economics, gender, age, ethnic origin, all these surface dissimilarities evaporate when there is a common enemy. These things should also be missing when people share our common Savior, Jesus Christ.

These men were without hope. There was no known cure for leprosy. The diagnosis was a death sentence. There was nothing lepers could do to help themselves and there was nothing anyone else could do to help them. The only hope these poor men had was the traveling teacher they must have heard about. This one thread of hope is what drew them near the gate of the city to meet Jesus.

Scripture tells us the men cried out in a loud voice. Being loud is difficult in the advanced stages of leprosy, so we don't know exactly how loud they were. What we do know is their cry was a cry of desperation. Theirs was a cry of hopelessness and helplessness. Exactly the kind of cry that never fails to get God's attention.

Their cry was also a cry born in humility. These poor souls were in no position to make any demands. They had no civil rights to fall back on. They had no social or economic status that would give them an advantage. They certainly weren't part of the beautiful people. The only thing they could hope for was mercy. And they directed their cry to the author of all mercy.

They cried out in desperation and humility, and God heard their prayer. Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priests. This was in accordance with the Mosaic law covering the healing of skin diseases. This also called for an act of faith on the lepers' part. They weren't healed until they started acting as though they were healed – until they did what Jesus told them to do. They started walking and then they were healed.

Now we come to a crucial part of the story. One leper, seeing that his death sentence had been commuted by God, returned to thank Jesus. One out of ten made the connection between Jesus and God. One returned to glorify God. One returned to worship God. One returned to give thanks to God.

All ten men received cleansing from their physical disease. For the nine, that was all they received. However, the one who returned received something more. When that man saw Jesus in God and God in Jesus, when he realized what God had done for him, he acknowledged God as God, and Jesus told him: *Your faith has made you well* (Lk 17:19). The King James Version says: *Thy faith hath made thee whole*.

This man's faith did more than heal his body. His faith healed his soul as well. He not only received physical healing, he also received spiritual healing. His faith in Jesus removed the leprosy from his body and the sin from his soul. This man is an excellent example of a repentant sinner.

This man was lost in a crowd of lepers. He had no identity of his own. He was just another leper. Without Jesus we are lost in a crowd of sinners. We are like all the other

sinner with no identity of our own. Paul writes: *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Rom 3:22-23).

But that's not the end of the story. While the others were satisfied with physical healing, this man knew he needed something more. In faith, this man turned to Jesus and gained a new identity. This man became a believer, a Christian, an acceptable child of God. His faith made him an heir to the promise of Ephesians 2:8: *By grace you have been saved, through faith.*

The nine in this story were very much like many people today to claim the name of Christian. Many people see Jesus as a great teacher. Some even call him master. However, too many of these fail to follow his teachings. Too many of these refuse to let him be the master of their lives. Too many Christians are more concerned with solving the problems in their lives than the problems in their souls. They are more concerned with the outside than the inside.

Jesus addressed this problem with the Pharisees of his day. He told them: *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness* (Mt 23:25-28).

Jesus asked, "Where are the nine?" Do you suppose he wanted all ten to return? Of course, he did. He displayed God's power in their presence. They saw God moving powerfully in their lives to save them. They called out to God and God saved them. He wanted them to return to him.

What Jesus wanted then, he also wants now. God has moved powerfully in people's lives and he wants them to return to him. God came. God died. God saved. But, sadly, many people come near to Jesus, but they don't come to Jesus. Sadly, many come close enough to bring about an outward change, but not close enough to experience an inward change.

We are all like the ten lepers. We all have problems, even if our problems aren't as obvious as theirs. If our problems aren't physical, they might be emotional, they might be spiritual. But we all have problems.

Also, like the ten, we all have the right to take our problems to Jesus. Sometimes God allows problems in our lives so we do turn to him. A now-sainted lady I had the pleasure to know, was fond of saying, "Sometimes God knocks you flat on your back so the only way you can look is up." Jesus is the proper place to take all our trials and troubles because Jesus has, does, and will help.

After we have experienced God's power in our lives, the question becomes, "Are we like the one or the nine?" When God moves in our lives to do the things we cannot do, do we feel like the emergency is over and forget to be thankful? Do we put God back on the shelf to wait for our next dilemma?

Thanking God for all he has done in our lives is one of the most important things we can do. God treasures our prayers, our songs, and our lives of thanksgiving. God blesses our thanksgiving with increased faith and with an increased sense of who we are and who he is.

It is my prayer that you spend every moment of the rest of your life praising the God from whom all blessings flow.