

Turning Back, Praising God

Luke 17:11-19

Cradock Presbyterian Church

October 13, 2013

I know everybody here, at one time or another in your life, has watched TV game shows like “The Price Is Right” or “Let’s Make A Deal.” There are lots of other game shows, but those two stick out to me. What happens when they call someone to “Come on down?” What happens when one of those contestants wins big? You know! You never see such crazy celebrating anywhere else. Folks just get off on their good fortune. There have even been some times when people got so excited, they literally popped out of their clothes! And people have been knocked down in the excitement, including, a couple of times, the host.

And what about the day after Thanksgiving – or Thanksgiving Night, now – when they open the doors at your favorite big-box retailer and let people in for all the super low-price deals and even giveaways? People get knocked down and injured in the mad rush! Sometimes, the videos people upload to YouTube from those events are howlingly funny. At least, if you know no one got seriously hurt. They’re funny because you sit there and think, “How can these people act like that? It’s just a store!” Yet, when otherwise sane people get in one of those crowds, well – they might be among the ones knocking people down. Get out of the way!

Doesn’t this sound like a strange way to begin a sermon on a Gospel story? Today’s story is about the one person who thought about what was going on and stopped his own headlong rush, no matter how good it felt. He realized that what had just happened to him was a “God-thing,” because he saw through the eyes of faith. He

stopped thinking just about himself, his own good fortune. He stopped and thought about what had happened to him, about how his calling out in faith had been answered. And then, his response was to give the praise and thanks where and when and to whom it belonged. We can all learn something from him.

So once again, Jesus was preparing to enter a village. There were probably people waiting to see him, just like always, because at this point in his ministry, his fame was widespread, and there were always BIG crowds, often pushy, unruly crowds. Not unlike those Thanksgiving crowds at WalMart! They would push up against him and the disciples, and push others out of the way, and the scene would be chaotic; it seemed like *everybody* who lived in whatever village or town he entered would come out and try to get near him.

Jesus was traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee. Though these areas are very close on the map, they couldn't be farther apart in spirit. If you remember the state of race relations in *our* country about forty to fifty years ago, you'll have an idea of how much the Samaritans were hated. Indeed, the Samaritans *were* a different "race" than the Israelites. But because of where this story takes place, it's not surprising to see some Samaritans among the Jews of that region. They'd heard the news, too; they had things *they* wanted from Jesus.

As we said, just about everybody would come out when Jesus came. Now, in every town, there was a group of people who weren't allowed the privilege of physical contact with, or even allowed to get close to, anyone. They were the poor jokers called "unclean", and *they* were the ones afflicted with various diseases. The ones Jesus came

to heal. But by law, they had to remain outside of town; and if you got within a certain distance of them, they were required to shout, "unclean, unclean!", to warn you to avoid them. Usually, they were people whose physical symptoms you could easily see; in this village, they were lepers.

Yet these lepers weren't TOTALLY isolated. They had heard that Jesus was coming to town, and they strongly believed he could help them. They kept their distance, as they were supposed to do, but they cried out loudly, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" No doubt everyone around Jesus heard them yelling, because Jesus heard them. And there's no trickery here; everyone in town knew them and knew their condition. You can bet that some people were trying to silence 'em; if Jesus did go to those howling lepers, why, *he* would become unclean, and then he couldn't help anyone else. That's sorta like stealing someone's place in line, isn't it?

There's one strange thing here, though: it's *what* the lepers were yelling. The word in the original language translated "master" is a different one than we usually see. Usually, the word is "*kurie*," which means "master" but also gets translated "Lord," especially when it has to do with Jesus. The word used by the lepers is "*epistataes*", which means something like "expert", and means he or she exercises "technical mastery." Those lepers saw Jesus in terms of what he could do for them as far as their afflictions. You might almost translate it, "Doctor, Doctor - help me!" It was almost like you or I going to see a specialist. Jesus the dermatologist!

The story now takes another strange turn. Rather than simply say, "you're cured," Jesus tells them to "go and show yourselves to the priests." You would only do that, only

go to the priests, if you'd *already been cured*, or if your disease had gone away. The priests were the ones who would declare you "clean," and then you could be around other people again. Those lepers must have wondered why he said this. But here's the thing: they believed in him enough to do what he said. So off they went. You know what they were hoping for! You know what they were *watching* for. And sure enough – as they went, they were made clean. Was it their faith that Jesus could heal them that produced the cure? Or was it their going as he told them – their obedience? On the way, doing as he said, they noticed – *they weren't lepers anymore*.

Take just a minute to imagine how that must have felt, to be able to be around people and to live normally, to not have to shout about yourself, "Unclean, unclean!" Imagine that you've been forced to stay out around Cradock High School, in a tent or a hut, and rely on people leaving food and water for you somewhere, in order to avoid seeing you or coming into contact with you. Then imagine how it would feel to be allowed to come back into town again. That's hitting the jackpot! These ten men could see and feel the results of their obedience to Jesus. And as soon as they go to them, the priests would be giving them their ticket back to society. To a person deemed worthless, shut off from any meaningful human contact – I can't think of any bigger prize. Wouldn't you or I be excited – so excited, that we couldn't think of anything else? Wouldn't we start making plans we couldn't have made before? I'm sure they were overwhelmed! I'm sure they were very emotional. So can you blame them for thinking only of themselves? This was the biggest thing to ever happen in their lives, way bigger than winning a new flat screen on Christmas Shopping Day One. I guess you might

compare it to being told you're cured of cancer. You'd want to tell everyone you knew, you'd be so excited. In miracle stories like this one, we usually talk about some sort of proof that the miracle has taken place. All of those lepers sprinting off to the priests, there's your proof.

But in this headlong rush to the priests, one man realizes how *his* cure came about. This man knows: in the person of Jesus, *God himself did the healing*. In his mind, there was only one thing left to do. The others might want to get to the priests as fast as they can, but this one makes his own choice – his own decision. It's not a decision based on selfishness or excitement – but on faith. So, in a figurative sense, he walks away from the rush to the doors, and he goes back to Jesus. All the way back, he's just praising God at the top of his lungs, calling attention to any who hear about what God has done. In your mind's eye you can see him, weaving in and out among the people on the streets, showing off his healthy skin, maybe even slapping high fives, giving God a real shout-out. You can almost hear the people saying to each other, "Wasn't he one of those lepers? Now look at him! God has done something great!" And he kept on walking, running, praising, until he got back to Jesus. Finally, he goes right up to Jesus, and falls down right at his feet, and gives thanks, with his face to the ground. He couldn't have done this if he was still a leper – the crowd would have chased him away with sticks and stones. So there's more "proof" of the miracle, if you need it: this man's return, his obviously being "clean" now, and his loud and unceasing praise are more proof than anyone would ever need. Proof about who Jesus really is!

The story could end happily there, but there's another strange thing: the word in the original language, that describes what's happened to him thus far, is again a technical one; he was "cured", but in the narrow, medical sense. An analogy would be giving someone an antacid for a tummy ache, when they actually have an ulcer. Or giving them strong painkillers for a broken bone. The pain is gone, but the healing is not complete. Is there more to do, more to come?

There's one other strange thing: this man was a Samaritan, one of those people hated by the Jews. You wouldn't expect him to be the one to come back and praise God all the way, but he does.

And so Jesus marvels at it. "Weren't ten made clean?" he asks. "But the other nine – where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Remember, I mentioned earlier that if you wanted to understand the tensions between the Jews and the Samaritans, you could think back to race relations in America fifty years ago. Well, the word that gets translated "foreigner" here literally means "another race." What Jesus was saying, then, is this: "This man whom most of you despise is doing what all of you should do, and certainly the other nine men who were made clean!" We don't get a reaction in this miracle story from the crowd; instead, we see *Jesus'* reaction. And here it is: "Get up and go on your way," he says, "your faith has *made you well*." That seems simple enough, except for one other thing. The word Jesus uses to describe the man as being *made well* is the same word that we usually translate as "*saved*." It has the meaning of healing in the complete sense: body AND spirit. Where the other nine men were only healed in the narrow sense of having their

disease remitted, this man has been healed completely. In every way! He's been *saved*. And it was due to his faith: not just that Jesus could heal his body, but that God was working through him and in him.

As every sermon ought to, we now turn around to look at us – you and me. How often do we run off when our healing – our “saving” – has just begun? Is it only superficial – not yet complete? We should turn back, and turn back, and turn back! – so that God can finish healing us – “saving” us – completely. Fortunately for us, WE are not suffering and isolated like those ten lepers – at least, not in our bodies. Where we suffer and isolate ourselves is in our spirit. Can you think of a better definition of sin? A good Presbyterian sermon ought to remind us that we all sin, and that sin deforms us from the image God had in mind when he created us. And sin isolates us from each other, because we no longer look to serve the other person – which would bring us together – but look to serve only ourselves. When good things happen, we go on our merry ways, we rush through our own doors, and we don't look to give thanks, or even to share. Or even to look out for somebody else. Worst of all, like those lepers, we're helpless to heal ourselves. Paul had it right when he exclaimed, "wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this life of sin and death?"

The Good News is that *we* have been healed, saved, and set free from the "life of sin and death" by Christ's work on the cross. Christ has said the healing words to us: "Whoever believes in [me] shall not perish but have eternal life." And so we have been sent on our way, healed, restored, ready to come together again because our isolation is over.

But what happens? We let ourselves get into a headlong rush, pushed along by the things of the world, just as those 9 lepers were in a rush to get to the priests. I think for most of our lives we're like the nine who were healed but kept going, never looking back. What we need is to be the one, who went back to the point where his healing started, and gave thanks, and made sure others saw how great God's works are. Are you and I rushing along, forgetting to stop, forgetting to turn back, and park at God's feet, and give thanks, and let others see how great is our God? I plead guilty! – and I'm sure most of you, if not all of you, might just feel the same way, too. But it's never too late to slam on the brakes, put on the turn signal, and turn back to praise God! – by our words, by our dedication, by our works. I'm sure that if we look at our lives, we'll find plenty to be thankful for, and lots of reason to give that praise. So let us resolve ourselves this morning to be the kind of people, each of us, who remember to be thankful: for all God has done, and all he is doing, and all he will do, for us all.