



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday September 1, 2013 - Trinity 14

The passage taken for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“And Jesus answering said, ‘Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.’”

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

There are a lot more miracles and healings that Jesus did than are reported in the Gospel. We have to wonder why it is that the ones that were selected were put there. The answer is, they were put there because they were reflective not only of the signs that proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah that was to come but because those particular illnesses that are cured in the Gospels and these encounters are the illnesses that afflict us spiritually as people who are striving, struggling to be good Christians. They're really instructive to us about the nature of ourselves as well as instructing us as to the nature of Christ's identity.

Leprosy is one of those diseases we're supposed to recognize as a spiritual condition from which we suffer. The physical disease of leprosy is a terrible disease. It's called “the living death”; your extremities begin to die and it works its way back into your core. You knew that there was no hope, that there was no cure. Not only was the disease itself terrible, it had social consequences that were even worse. Anybody who had leprosy was so contagious that they were expelled from the community and had to live outside the city. Around Jerusalem, where they congregated in what became a leper colony, was an area called Gehanna, which was where all the waste was brought. In a real sense these lepers lived in a hell on earth, with flaming refuse on fire, noxious fumes, and with this horrible disease from which they could not be cured.

What we're supposed to recognize in leprosy is, that is the condition of our souls as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We are spiritually living a death. We are anticipating our destruction because we are excluded from the community of God's love and God's healing. We have no place to go except to an unhappy end with noxious flames and loneliness -- until, we're baptized. We are restored to the community from which we were excluded.

That Baptism is tied to leprosy goes all the way back to the Old Testament. Back in the story of Elisha, we have an encounter that he has with a Syrian general named Naaman. Naaman was a very proud man; he had been through a lot of battles, he was the king's favorite general, he sat and ate with him and worshiped with him. But he was a leper. During those conquests, when you won your battles, you took slaves, and one of the slaves that he took was a little Jewish girl. That Jewish girl became a servant to his wife, and even though she was a slave, she looked at her master who had leprosy and took pity on him. She said, “There is a holy man in Samaria, and that man can take away your leprosy.”

Naaman decided he would go. He went to the king of Syria, received letters of commendation to go to the king of Judea, he built his entourage around him (what kids today would call a posse) -- a whole group of people that made him feel very important, and with all his officers and men and his finery, he marched into Jerusalem, demanded to see the king, and demanded that Elisha be brought to him so that he could be healed. I don't know exactly what Naaman expected that Elisha could do, but what happened left him pretty underwhelmed. Elisha didn't come. In fact, he only sent a messenger to say, “Tell Naaman to go dunk himself in the Jordan River, and he'll be fine.”

Well, this very proud man, full of himself, surrounded by his entourage, went into a full blown tantrum. He threatened to declare war against Jerusalem until a couple of his servants managed to pull him together and say, “You know, you're ready to wage holy war, you're going to go do all the quests of Hercules for this healing, and now this simple thing is asked of you -- maybe you should give it a try.” So Naaman went to the Jordan River and is washed seven times, and he comes out purified and clean.

Of course, you shouldn't lose the symbolism and understanding that it is that same Jordan River where John the Baptist does his baptizing and where Jesus is proclaimed as the Son of God, so this idea of washing as to healing of our spiritual leprosy is a very old idea and one that is consistent in the Old and New Testaments.

So Naaman is healed, and he wants to return to Elisha and shower him with gifts, but Elisha says, "No, here's what I want of you. I want you to be thankful, I want you to proclaim this God as your God, and to return to your people." And this very proud, impetuous, brat of a man does something that is miraculous. He turns to Elisha, humbled, and he says, "I ask you one more favor, that you pray for me with your God. When I get back to Syria, I will have to go to the services with my king, and I will sit there before his gods, but I would like you to tell your God that I will never be praising god without praising the one, the only true God. Forgive me that I sit in that other place." And this once proud, bratty man really is converted to a full understanding and appreciation and love of God.

Now these ten lepers that Jesus encountered were very much like Naaman. They knew there was a holy man in Samaria who could heal them. They set out to find him and were waiting for him -- they knew he would come by that road -- but because they were lepers they weren't allowed to approach him, which is why the Gospel says, "They cried out to him from afar off" because they weren't allowed to approach Jesus. They asked Jesus for mercy and for healing, and He told them to go to the priests. Why the priests? That's a little odd, isn't it? Well, it goes back to Mosaic law, as far back as Moses. Even then it was understood that leprosy was a spiritual condition, an emotional and heart-felt condition that required certification of healing, not from a doctor nor from a health official, but only a priest could say that you were healed and welcome you back into the community of faith.

So Jesus sends these men to the priests to get the certification of their healings so they can be reintroduced back into their city and back into their faith. As they traveled along, one -- who was a Samaritan -- recognized that he had been healed and he returned to Jesus, and it says that "he worshiped Him," which means he recognized Him as God. He didn't just say, "Thanks." He didn't think He was a holy man, he didn't think He was a shaman or a yogi, he worshiped Him as the Son of God, he recognized Him, he gave Him praise and glory and thanks. And Jesus said, "What about the other nine? Where are they?" They were healed, they were returned to their city, and they were brought back into the life and faith of Jerusalem. But they weren't brought into the full knowledge of Jesus, they weren't brought into the gift that this one Samaritan returned for. What Jesus says next is very, very important. He looks at this man who has fallen on his feet and worshiped Him, and given Him thanks and says, "Arise

and go thy way. Thy faith hath made thee whole." What an interesting idea. The other nine were healed, but only one was made whole.

What does it mean that we are made "whole?" To be whole in the eyes of God means we get to do what we were made to do. Why were we created? We were created to praise God and give Him thanks. This man arises and he is whole because he has given God what God created him to do. That is wonderful, but that isn't the end of the blessing. Like every good parent, the our Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, do not take our gifts and walk away with them. Like every good parent, you receive your gift from your child, you praise it, you elevate it, you honor it -- and you return it. Every gift that we give, this little bit of praise and thanksgiving that we offer to God, which is only what we were created to do, is elevated, honored, and blessed and is returned with grace.

What is the grace that we get? The grace is this -- we not only get to live a life that is healed of sin, we get to live a life of love, a life that we share with Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus gives this man not only healing, but love, community, His very attention and His being. When we give praise and thanksgiving to God, we get that too. We get His very Life, His Body, and His Blood, to live in us. We don't only inherit what Adam had, which is what those other nine lepers got, a life that has been cleaned, we actually get the Body and Blood of Christ, the Life of Christ, the Love of His Father, and His destination of being in a world of love with His Father and the people He has brought with Him. All of that becomes ours when we say, during the consecration, that He gives us this bread so that He can live in us, and we can live in Him. That is what it means to be made "whole," having a whole life because we have no limitations. We actually get the love that is reserved for Jesus by His Father and the life that is promised to Him, and the opportunity to be with the ones we love and share His love for them forever in Heaven.

How beautiful and wonderful it is to give this simple gift, which we were created to do, and we get all of that back. The 30th Psalm, which I'll use to close, the 11 and 12th verses, proclaim what it is that we should all be living:

"Thou hast turned my heaviness into joy; thou has put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness; Therefore shall every good man sing of thy praise without ceasing. Oh my God, I will give thanks unto thee for ever."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen