



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday September 17, 2017 - Trinity 14,

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

The passage taken for the sermon this morning is 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.’”

There are many more miracles and healings done by Jesus than are reported in the Gospels. We should wonder why it is that the ones that were selected are particularly given to us. The answer is that those particular illnesses that are cured in the Gospels are the spiritual illnesses that afflict us as we struggle to be good Christians. These accounts are meant to be instructive about our nature and the nature of our relationship to God.

We should recognize leprosy as sin, the spiritual condition from which we still suffer. The physical disease of leprosy is a terrible. It's called “the living death”. Extremities begin to die and it works its way back into the core. There is 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, noxious fumes, and with this horrible disease from which they could not be cured.

Leprosy is also the condition of our souls as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We are spiritually living a death. This life of sin is anticipating our destruction because we are excluded from the community of God's love and God's healing. There is no place for us to go, except to an unhappy end, with noxious flames, despair

and loneliness -- until, we are baptized. Only then are we restored to the community from which we were excluded.

That Baptism is tied to leprosy goes all the way back to the Old Testament. Elisha has an encounter with a Syrian general named Naaman. Naaman was a very proud man; he had been through many 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 to see if Elisha could actually heal him. He went to the king of Syria, and received letters of commendation to go to the king of Judea. He gathered 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 in his finery, he marched into Jerusalem, demanded to see the king, and required that Elisha be brought to him so that he could be healed. I don't know exactly what Naaman expected that Elisha would 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 calmed him down. “You were willing to take on all the quests of Hercules for this

healing, and now this simple thing is asked of you – and you fly into a rage. Maybe you should give it a try.” So Naaman went to the Jordan River and was washed seven times. He came out purified, healed and clean.

Of course, we shouldn't lose sight of the symbolism that it is that same Jordan River where John the Baptist did his work and where Jesus is proclaimed as the Son of God, This understanding of washing as healing of our spiritual leprosy is a very old idea and one that is consistent through the Old testament and revealed as Baptism in the New Testament.

Once Naaman was healed, he wanted to return to Elisha and shower him with gifts, but Elisha said, “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 did something that was miraculous. He turned to Elisha, humbled, and he said, “I ask you one more favor, that you pray for me to 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, self important man really was 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” . 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 it was understood that leprosy was a spiritual condition, that required certification of healing, not from a doctor, or from a health official, but by a priest. Only a priest could certify that you were healed, and welcome you back into the community of God's people.

Jesus sent these men to the priests to get the certification of their healings so they could be reintroduced back into their community 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 the Gospel 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 honor. Then 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 to find and received. What Jesus says next is very, very important. He looks at this man, who has fallen at his feet and worshiped Him, and given Him thanks and said, “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 rises and he is made whole because he has done what God created him to do. That is wonderful, but that isn't the end of the blessing. Like every good parent, the Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, do not take our gifts and walk away with them. Like every good parent, who receive gifts from their children, they celebrate the gift, they elevate it, honor it -- and they return it. Every gift that we give, every little bit of praise and thanksgiving that we offer to God, which is only what we were created to do, is elevated, honored, blessed and then 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 attention and His very 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. That is what it means to be made “whole”. We actually share the love that is reserved for Jesus by His Father, the eternal life we were created to live, and the opportunity to be with the ones we love forever in Heaven.

How beautiful and wonderful it is to give this simple gift of thanks, which we were created to do, and to made whole in return.

“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.” Psalm 30:11-12

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