

"Even better than normal" Luke 17:11-19 Trinity 14 2024

Dear Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

On the way to Jerusalem to face the cross, Jesus encounters ten lepers - ten outcasts - ten people with, for their time at least, a sentence of death. By the rules of their society, rules created because of the fear of contamination, lepers were forced to live apart from everyone else, and on those occasions when they drew near to others for one reason or another, to announce their presence and to warn others to stand off. Until relatively recently lepers were treated as the living dead - shunned and avoided, they were regarded as unclean, - as people most likely guilty of great sin, - as people beyond help.

But as Jesus enters a village ten lepers approach him, and mindful of the rules of their society, mindful of their need to avoid contaminating anyone, and mindful too of the fear that others had of them, they call out to Jesus from a distance: "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" What a poor, pathetic cry that must have been. Jesus does respond, but he does so in a most unusual manner. Rather than saying, as he had said to others, "Be healed - rise up - look and see - take up your bed and walk", Jesus says "Go, show yourselves to the priests". Can you see the possible confusion? They have asked for mercy - they have asked to be healed, but Jesus does nothing for them other than tell them to go and act as if they are healed - to go and present

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themselves to the priests as if they were whole, healed, accepted, living people. Yet, despite the possible confusion in understanding what Jesus was saying, they go, and as they go they are cleansed.

Now as we know, one of the ten, a Samaritan man upon realizing he has been healed, turns back and praises God with a loud voice he comes to Jesus, falls at his feet, and thanks him. And Jesus looks upon him - and he says something very important for all his disciples to hear. He says, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has saved you."

Notice Jesus didn't say his faith had "cured" him - the other nine were cured of leprosy, even though they didn't come back. Jesus said his faith had saved him. Jesus here meant something more than being cured, here Jesus meant that man had been saved through faith and made whole again. My friends, this should not surprise us, for this is how the Bible explains the saving of anyone, through faith. But it might surprise you to see faith as something that leads us to a life that is more than normal.

Think of it this way: Nine lepers got healed, one got saved. Nine people go away from Jesus healed, but not saved, because they put their lives as lepers, as outcasts, as dead people, behind them. They go

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in obedience most certainly, but they go in a hurry, anxious to be on with it, to begin living like everyone lives. They go away unsaved because all they want is a normal life - a life like that they have dreamed of, a life like that which they had before they became lepers, - a life like everyone else's: of going to school, driving to work on Mondays, attending synagogue on Friday night if nothing more interesting is going on, of eating yogurt out of plastic containers, meeting someone and maybe starting a family of nice, normal, ordinary kids.

But the tenth leper - he is not in such a hurry to forget how bad it was - he's not in such a hurry to get a normal life. He realizes there is something more. The hand of God has touched his life. Jesus had accepted him - as he accepted the other nine, before he, before they, were healed. But this man, through faith saw the significance of how it didn't matter to Jesus that they were lepers, that they were outcasts, that they were dead in their sins. And the Samaritan realizes this - he realizes how unusual, how out of the ordinary, how exceptionally gracious this is, and he gives thanks to God, and Jesus for it. His acknowledgment of this fact - his Thanksgiving - is called faith by Jesus, a faith focused on God's grace that saves.

I fear that all too many of us are in the position of the nine lepers who went onward to the priests and a renewal of their "normal lives".

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How many of us have made vows to God to do something for him if only God in return would do this or that for us (yes, we know we are not supposed to do this, but we do) - and then promptly forgotten those vows when our lives have returned to normal?

How about this? How many of us have had the experience of having communed in the body and blood of Christ- only to forget that experience shortly thereafter, like those who have never encountered grace? How many times has his Holy Word told us that God is truly out there and that he truly cares, and then on top of that have something happen which confirms his promises - only to go on with living our lives like normal people, like those who have never known the grace of God's forgiveness or the wonder of his many gifts?

Too remote an example? Well, how many of us have been in trouble, how many of us have despaired, how many of us have been rejected by friends and by family members, and then encountered one day a person who has helped us, or experienced an event or a series of events that has allowed us to live again, to live and rejoin those whom we had feared forever lost to us and then failed to treat each day thereafter as a incredible gift from God?

What a shame to have met Jesus, the Lord, and Giver of Life, to have met the one who loves to eat and drink with sinners and to

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worship in the synagogues and the temple and to pray alone on the mountain tops and in the wilderness, and to then come away from that meeting with nothing more than our health. What a shame to have met Jesus, the risen Christ, the one who takes us and embraces us just as we are, the one who forgives us and gives us his resurrection power and comes away from that meeting with nothing more than normal.

The power of salvation for life that is more than normal, a life of gratitude and thanksgiving, is effective only when we are remembering our previous state - what was normal for us - how we were enslaved by the powers of despair, darkness, and death, and seeing the miracle of what we have now - of seeing that God has acted in Christ on the cross and is still acting in Word and Sacrament and so many other wonderful ways, and of then acting like this is the day that the Lord alone has made, and rejoicing and being glad in it.

Our faith is not about how to live a normal life. It is about how God touches us and Christ embraces us and raises not only that which was dead to new life but transforms that which was ordinary into the blessedness of the more than normal, the blessedness of knowing that God's loving hand and God's gracious heart is in every moment of each one of our days.

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One day Jesus healed ten lepers. Of them, nine went away as commanded to show themselves to the priests and return to their normal lives. But one of them, a Samaritan, turned and gave Jesus thanks - and he was made whole, he was saved - on account of his faith. May the same be truly said of us. Amen.