

When we meet new people, we ask questions like, “Where did you grow up? Did you live in town or on a farm? Where did you go to college? We ask questions like that because place and background are important. Are you German or Italian or Irish?

In today’s gospel, we are still with Jesus on his way from his home in Galilee to Jerusalem. On that journey, we have seen him do a number of healings, watched him respond to several Pharisee and scribe interruptions, and listened to him instructing his disciples about how to improve their discipleship.

Today, he and his entourage were walking near Samaria. Here, geography is really important - this was not friendly ground – it’s very much like enemy territory. Samaritans and Jews were never on good terms. It does not indicate what village they entered, but it does say they were met by a delegation of ten lepers – here, near Samaria.

By Old Testament law, lepers were required to warn people of their presence. It says in Leviticus 13:46, “The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes, and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, Unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease.” And listen to this: “He is unclean; He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” Here they were, ten lepers, standing at a distance. These lepers were always, “outsiders!”

So, while keeping their distance, today’s text says they called, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” And Jesus said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” So they went – and as they were going to have the priests check them out, they all discovered that they were made clean. Isn’t that something?

Then it says that one of them, one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back - turned back to do what? It says he did three things - praised God with a loud voice, prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet, and thanked him. Then Luke points out that this person who turned back was, of all people, a Samaritan.

That’s when Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine?” At this point we have the serious temptation to condemn those nine who didn’t come back to thank Jesus! Why those selfish, ungrateful scoundrels – healed of a disease so repugnant that they were expelled from

society – completely made clean to return to real community life - healed and able to have family life again - healed and able to be with friends again - healed and able to have jobs again? And they don't even return to say, “Thanks?” It's easy to condemn them.

So, first, I want to say a word for those nine who didn't come back: Clearly, there is nothing in the text about why they didn't come back - so we have to make some things up. But that's OK – as long as we know that we are making it up – taking some liberty to use the freedom of our imaginations.

(1) For the first - it was very simple. This whole thing scared him and he went into hiding! He had been ugly for years and years and years. Even though he was now clean, he had been removed from society for so long that he didn't remember how to be with people anymore. It just scared him! He had forgotten how to shake hands, forgotten how to hug, he had been removed for so long that the only thing he could do was yell out, “Leper. Leper. Unclean. Unclean!” He was frightened and so he hid. Isn't that something – that there may be people so frightened of life, and of other people, that they need to hide? How can they come and say, “Thank you!”?

(2) A second guy had been made clean too – but he was offended! He thought that this was just too easy! He thought that he should have had to do something! Maybe it should have required weeks and weeks of fasting, months and months of medical treatment, a lifetime of rehab. Then, maybe, and only then, could there be healing. This was just too easy. He believed in, “You get what you earn,” and “You get what you pay for,” and “Anything that's free, well that just can't be any good.” and “There is no free lunch.” Isn't that something – people so hung up on earning, so hung up on meriting and deserving, that they just can't receive? I recall Jesus saying, “Unless you become as little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Children can receive, in fact, that may be the only thing they can really do – receive. Some adults can't receive – they think they have to earn everything.

(3) What about the third? Know what? - he realized that he had made a mistake! He had this terrible disease, asked to be healed, was made clean, and then realized that he really wanted to be remain sick. That's strange isn't it - he wanted to be ill. Why that's how he attracted attention. That's how he appropriated pity. And that's how he collected his disability check. For him, it

was better to be diseased and disabled than to be healthy. This guy made a mistake.

The fourth? You and I can really identify with this one – he just plain forgot! Right or wrong, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible – he just plain forgot! We all know about forgetting to thank, even our family and our friends. No excuse is necessary and because no excuse is acceptable. He just plain forgot.

(5) The fifth one was simply unable to come back! What happens inside a person who has been shunned by others all his life? What happens inside a person who has begged just to stay alive? What happens inside, to one who has settled for handouts and leftovers all the time? Maybe, on the inside, they are so ashamed and have so little self-esteem, that they are simply aren't able – coming back and talking and visiting is no longer possible. When you have been the bag lady, living in the alleys of our cities, having had no home for 40 years, maybe the time does come when saying, “Thank you!” is just not possible any more.

(6) Number six? Again, it doesn't say so in the text, but let's imagine that this one is a female. She was a woman, once was a wife, was a mother, by now, maybe she was even a grandmother. Think about it – 40 years away from husband, 40 years away from her two children, maybe she's never seen her grandchildren. When she discovers that she is made clean, what do you suppose she did? She ran right back home. I mean straight back. There are no detours, no stopping at “Go” to collect \$200 and no going back to find this Jesus guy. Maybe later, but not now – now its right, straight back home! People can be so released, so freed up, that just won't take time to say, “Thanks!”

(7) The seventh? He was a skeptic – He didn't believe that Jesus had a single thing to do with it. He was healed and he knew that he was clean. He didn't believe in miracles and he didn't believe in Jesus. He didn't even think about an explanation. Some folks receive all kinds of good in this life, but never trace it to God. Those people believe, that if there is a God, God has no effect on life.

(8) The eighth was exactly the opposite – he was a real believer!

And he didn't return because of that belief. Yes, He believed that Jesus had made him clean. So there he goes, out there into the world, telling all of his family and friends about Jesus. There he is, telling everyone on the street corner about Jesus. There he is, out there trying to convert people. He has no time to waste. It may be near the end of the world – and there is a lot of witnessing to do.

(9) The ninth is big mystery – He just disappeared.

You've heard of that, haven't you? - Jimmy Hoffa, Emelia Erhart, Madalyn O'Hair - one day they just disappeared - and we've never seen them again. So why didn't he return? I don't know. All I know is that he showed himself to the priest and immediately was cleansed. He then stood still for a moment and smiled. The priest reports that the ninth leper gave two utterances. First he said, 'So!' and then, 'Ah, yes!' Without another word he walked away. His eyes blazed fire but his shoulders sagged as if under a great burden. The air around him was silent. Then without warning he turned his head suddenly and fixed his eyes upon a rock by the side of the road. "Hah!" he screamed. And you can make of this what you will, but the priest says that the rock actually jumped a foot off the ground. The ninth leper then said, 'So!' and 'Ah, yes!' and disappeared from sight. It is impossible to say precisely why he did not return to give thanks."

The bottom line about this story, however, is that it's not at all about the nine who didn't come back. You know what the bottom line? And this is what we will close with. This is really a story about God, and about the ONE WHO DID COME BACK. It's about a God who is ready to make anyone clean. That's what happened here. The ten lepers called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" and ten lepers were made clean. It is not clear that the ten included any fellow Jews – but it is clear that the ten included a Samaritan who was not accepted by the Jews, and it is clear that there were ten outsiders who were not accepted anyone.

Yes, this is a story about the long arms of God's mercy! No one is beyond the mercy of God! With God, there are no outsiders and outcasts at all! And it's a story about ONE WHO CAME BACK to worship. Note his action very carefully, "He turned back, praising God, prostrating himself and thanking." That's almost exactly how we memorize it in confirmation class,

"Only one" Luke 17:11-19 Trinity 14 2026

"We are to fear and love God by calling on him with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving."

We are here to praise God, we are here to prostrate ourselves before Him, and we are here to thank Him, especially for making us clean - even while we are still sinners. Amen.