

## **Sermon—Being Made Well**

6/6/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

While at Duke Divinity School, I served one of my ministerial internships at the Alliance of AIDS Services-Carolina. The Alliance was founded to provide residents of North and South Carolina who are HIV positive with medical care, housing assistance, food, and spiritual support. As a member of the faith ministries division, I was tasked with leading Bible studies and small groups, offering spiritual guidance and care, and making connections with local churches. It soon became apparent just how much my fear of contracting the disease was impacting my ministry. You see, despite my best efforts, I frequently found myself trying to avoid physical contact like hugs and handshakes, even though I knew that my chances of contracting the disease from such contact was nearly nothing. As I read today's Gospel lesson, I couldn't help but feel a sense of déjà vu, both with regards to my time at the Alliance and with regards to everything that I have felt and experienced over the past year. My guess is that I'm not the only one.

During Jesus' time, numerous skin diseases were labeled as leprosy. In addition to leprosy itself, shingles, scabies, eczema, staph infections, and even acne were considered the disease and subject to its regulations under Jewish law. Jewish law required that every leper separate themselves from society, wear torn clothes, dishevel their hair, and cover their upper lip and cry out "unclean, unclean" whenever anyone walked by. For those whose skin cleared up, reentry into society depended upon meeting with a priest, who would perform a cleansing ritual after inspecting the person's skin. For those who were not so lucky, the rest of their days would be filled with isolation, pain, and humiliation, including the belief that God had stricken them with the disease as punishment for their sins; punishment for everyone to see.

Given all this, it should come as little to no surprise that most lepers were reduced to begging for a living, and the way in which they often did so by placing a bowl along the road leading into a city, backing away, and calling on those passing by to have mercy on them. Most days, the best a leper could hope for was a few coins and crusts of bread. But this day, as the Gospel of Luke tells us, was different. While we don't know how or from whom, ten lepers had heard that Jesus was traveling nearby, so they went out to meet him, hoping for a miracle. They waited and waited somewhere between Galilee and Samaria, until they finally saw Jesus approaching the city gates and anxiously called out, "Master, have mercy on us." It must have been quite the sight. Who knows how long Jesus stood there looking at them in their raggedy clothes, with their disheveled hair and covered upper lips, before instructing them to "Go and show themselves to the priests." As the ten of them turned and went away, the raised bumps, purple lumps, and open sores covering their bodies disappeared. Miraculously, they had been healed and made clean. But even more so, by being made clean they had been offered a new chance at life.

Because of what happened that day, each of them could now be ritually cleansed by a priest, take off their raggedly clothes, comb their hair, uncover their lips, and return home. No longer would their friends, families, and communities feel the need to abandon and ostracize them. That day, life began anew. And yet, despite all that the Son of God had done for them, only one of them seemed to fully grasp the significance of what had just happened. Luke tells us that when this man looked down and saw that he had been healed and made clean, he turned back and praised God, and upon finding Jesus fell at his feet and thanked him. Then Luke adds, as if we're being told something important, that the man who had turned back to thank Jesus was not a Jew, but a Samaritan.

Like I mentioned last Sunday, Samaritans and Jews notoriously despised each other. You see, while the Jews had been in exile, the Samaritans had settled in the land between Samaria and Galilee, the land through which Jesus was currently traveling. Now, much like the present-day divide between Palestine and Israel, not everyone had met the Jews' return to the Promised Land with open arms. That animosity is why a Samaritan would have been among the last people that a faithful Jew would have expected to stretch out at Jesus' feet, thank him, and praise God with a loud voice. But notice, what surprised Jesus that day was not that the man praising God and lying at his feet was a Samaritan. Rather, his surprise lay in the fact that this man was the only one who had returned. "Were not ten made clean," we hear Jesus ask before wondering where the other nine had gone. Perhaps, the other nine had come to believe that their healing depended upon them seeing a priest as soon as possible; that they would be stricken with leprosy again if they came back too soon. Or maybe the other nine were so desperate to see their friends and family—to return to their previous lives—that they never even gave thanking Jesus a second thought. We're not given the answer. What we are told is that because of his decision to return and praise God the Samaritan was blessed with one miracle which the other nine did not receive. "Get up and go on your way," he was instructed by Jesus, "Your faith has made you well."

How many of you just noticed what made this last blessing different than the one before? I must admit that I missed it the first time too. In our Gospel lesson for today, we hear how Jesus healed all ten lepers and made them clean. Only the Samaritan was made well. The Greek word for well, *sozo*, can also be interpreted as whole or saved. Imagine how different we would read the story if *sozo* had been translated as saved instead. What if that day the Samaritan had not simply been healed and made clean, but saved? What if, in turning back to thank Jesus and praise God, the Samaritan was professing his faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God? What if he was

acknowledging that he longed not simply to have his body healed and made clean like the other lepers, but to have his body and soul saved by his Savior? The issue with my reluctance to give hugs and handshakes to those people with HIV so many years ago was not that I did not want to contract the disease. God desires that we take care of ourselves and those around us. No, the issue was that I was allowing for my fear to build a barrier between myself and them, between myself and how God is calling on me to live, and quite possibly between them and God as well.

Whether we want to admit it or not, diseases like AIDS, leprosy, and COVID all-too-often impact how we view and act toward others. They cause us to build barriers like that look we give when we notice someone is or is not wearing a mask, or that comment we make when we learn someone is or is not comfortable returning to in-person worship and fellowship. If we are truly committed to being healed and made well, then we need to be willing to do what is necessary to take these barriers down. We need to be willing to acknowledge that we are not perfect, that we have judged others and are in need of healing. We need to be more like the ten lepers that day when they called on Jesus to have mercy on them. And we need be willing to be more like the Samaritan when, after being healed, he returned to Jesus so that he might offer his thanks and praise to God.

We're worshipping here today because we long to have that type of relationship with God and one another. So why then, I must ask, do I find myself returning to the question of what happened to the other nine lepers? Probably, because chances are that they are the faithful Jews in the story. They are the ones who should have recognized just how profound a gift they had been given and returned to Jesus, offering God their thanks and praise. But they didn't, much like I didn't during those times when I have been too busy or when I have assumed that I deserve the gifts I have been given. In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus reminds us that there is an

important difference between being made clean and being made well, between having the appearance of being saved and actually being saved, and that this difference does not depend upon whether we are called a Christian or a non-Christian, or a Jew or a Samaritan. At the end of the day, the Samaritan was made well because his faith led him to turn to Christ, give thanks, and praise God. May we seek to do the same each and every day of our lives. Amen.