

Scripture

Luke 17: 11-19

(The Message)

11-13 It happened that as he made his way toward Jerusalem, he crossed over the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men, all people with leprosy, met him. They kept their distance but raised their voices, calling out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

14-16 Taking a good look at them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.”

They went, and while still on their way, they became clean. One of them, when he realized that he was healed, turned around, and came back, shouting his gratitude, glorifying God. He kneeled at Jesus’ feet, so grateful. He couldn’t thank him enough—and he was a Samaritan.

17-19 Jesus said, “Were not ten healed? Where are the nine? Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?” Then he said to him, “Get up. On your way. Your faith has healed and saved you.”

This gospel today is a favorite of mine because Jesus breaks down so many barriers. In our culture, it is difficult to understand how countercultural this passage really is for the early Christian community.

The trauma of leprosy was real. People were moved to the margins of their community because they were not only contagious but thought to be possessed by demons. Usually, the person with leprosy died alone, separated from daily meals with loved ones, education, care, compassion, and hope. Jesus steps in the center of the turmoil.

The gospel suggests that people have always separated out those they did not want to deal with. This human action is deep...

- We still divide.
- We still separate out.
- We still draw lines about who is in and who is out.
- We live in a time where division is profoundly real.
- We see this in our families when children and parents do not get along, and siblings still fight for attention.
- We see this in the way we blame people for mental illness or disease.

Divisions, lines drawn, isolation and fear are all real and discomforting, even today.

Several a years ago a person said to me, “I just can’t get comfortable in my own skin.” Then they went on to describe their life...

- Comparing and competing with others is not enough.
- Seeking expectations that they could never meet.
- Revealing loneliness that isolated them in their family, with friends, and even at church.

They were describing a skin-level life, looking all around at the people and circumstances of their life, unwilling or unable to look within themselves, below their skin-level life.

The person, who approached Jesus, wanted what the nine people with leprosy wanted:

- To have new and comfortable skin.
- To be accepted and approved of by others.
- To have all the people, to whom they gave power and authority, to declare them to be clean, to be enough.

If today’s gospel statistics are any indication then ninety percent of us live life at skin level. That is, we live on the surface. It is a “what you see is what you get” attitude. We assume there is nothing else. At skin level our view of life is mostly determined by whether life is going our way and whether we get what we want. Life is very much an exterior experience.

Now, not to suggest that skin-level life is easy or pain free. On the contrary, life at that level feels mostly like day-to-day-survival, is rarely peaceful and usually leaves us feeling as if something is missing. More than anything else skin-level life seeks to be comfortable; physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and financially.

There is nothing wrong with being comfortable until we choose to settle for being comfortable rather than moving to a deeper place, below skin-level, where a deeper way of seeing, relating, and living can be experienced.

Sometimes comfort can insulate us from the reality of life and the presence of God. From our scripture, we might notice that only about ten percent, one in ten of the people with leprosy, were willing to move in a new direction, to seek a wholeness that cannot be found in mere comfort.

For most of us when life gets uncomfortable, when things don't go our way, and we don't get what we want or expect then we begin seeking relief. We want the pain to stop and the situation to change or go away. Too often we look for quick easy solutions, something that will make us comfortable again; something that will allow us to go back to life the way it was before. That is the life of a person with leprosy. **That** is life at skin-level. One day you are clean. Life is as expected. You have work, friends, and family. You are part of the community. The next day everything changes. The next day you are unclean.

For the ten people with leprosy in today's gospel that means no family, no friends except each other, no work, no community. They were physically shunned and excluded. They were kept at the farthest edges of society. They had to wear shabby rags for clothes. They were a mess. If anyone started coming close, the person with leprosy was required to cry out "unclean, unclean."

That's how it is when you are a person with leprosy. You want to go back to the way it was before, when you were clean, but you would settle for comfort. From a distance you cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on me."

Regardless of our life's condition we know what it is like to be a person with leprosy. We may not have lived under the same conditions as the people with leprosy of Jesus' time, but we could each tell a story about a time when we just could not get comfortable in our own skin. That is the leprosy of today. Today's leprosy is not a medical condition or a legal status. It is, rather, a spiritual condition. It is leprosy of the heart. Its symptoms have nothing to do with our skin.

Instead, they are things like perfectionism, gluttony, sadness, anger, pride, boredom, gossip, the need for control or approval, fear, being judgmental, restlessness, excessive busyness, grudges, prejudice, jealousy, condemnation, indifference, addiction. Spiritual Leprosy

- distorts how we see and relate to God, the world, others, and even ourselves.
- keeps life at a superficial skin-level.

These symptoms, what some called "passions," reveal a deep discomfort. If we deal with them at the level of skin, seeking cleanness rather than wholeness, we can never truly be made well.

But there is always one of us who can look below the surface, to see more than new skin. One person with leprosy, the Samaritan, looks past the exterior illusions of new skin, seeing a deeper reality and understanding that healing is an interior condition. It is more about the heart than the skin. If we want the healing and wholeness that Jesus offers we will have to turn around and go in a direction different from the other nine.

Jesus offers more for us than we often desire for ourselves. What Jesus does for one is offered to all. "Were not ten healed? Where are the nine? Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?" It is not a rebuke. It is an invitation.

For Jesus, there are no outcasts. Jesus' presence heals. Today, in our prayer, we understand that we are challenged **to be** the healing that we desire. We are **to become** Jesus' presence among outcasts.

Here are some ways to pray through this gospel so let us pray:

- *Jesus, help us realize our own trauma and the ways in which we separate other people...*
- *Jesus, help us to cross the boundaries of how we shun people or think that only some deserve you...*
- *Jesus, come to us and heal all the separations even in our own hearts....*
- *Jesus, help us always to remain in full gratitude...Amen!*