

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
St. Luke 17:11-19: "How Valuable Is Your Health?"
September 21/22, 2019 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, by Your blessed Word and Your holy Baptism You have mercifully cleansed all who believe from the fearful leprosy of sin, and You daily grant us Your gracious help in all our need: We beseech You so to enlighten our hearts by Your Holy Spirit, that we may never forget these Your blessings, but ever live in Your fear, and, trusting fully in Your grace, with thankful hearts continually praise and glorify You; through Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 161)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

On the way to Jerusalem [Jesus] was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as He entered a village, He was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." / When He saw them He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. / Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving Him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. / Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And He said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose gracious healing is impartially offered to all sinners, dear fellow redeemed:

The ten men in today's Gospel were infected with leprosy, a disease that especially attacks the skin and nervous system. Nine of these men were Israelites and one was a Samaritan. They would typically have been at odds with each other, but their common illness brought them together. Any differences in their social status were set aside by their desperate situation. Leprosy was a great equalizer.

This disease is still active around the world but is rarely seen in the United States. In our country, the top two causes of death are heart disease and cancer. It would be difficult to find someone who had not lost a close relative or friend to one of these diseases. They are illnesses that strike all types – the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the physically weak and the physically fit.

When people are diagnosed with serious conditions like this, they are often willing to do whatever it takes to get better. They will endure the rigor and discomfort of treatment plans and surgical procedures. They will suffer the various side effects from medication. They will commit large amounts of time and money – all in the hopes of regaining the health they had before. This shows how valuable people consider their health to be.

It's also the case that we place a higher value on things that are harder to come by and not as available as they were before. When we are in good health, we take it for granted. We don't recognize what we have until we don't have it anymore. Nothing gets a person exercising and watching what he eats like a health scare does. Even a cold or a headache remind us what we have to be thankful for.

Now suppose you had a serious health problem, and somebody offered you medication with a 100% success rate. "There must be a catch," you think. "Why don't more people take advantage of this? The cost must be astronomical! The side effects must be unbearable!" You are informed that the side effects are nothing compared to your disease, but the cost is indeed much higher than you could afford. "But don't worry!" you're told. "The cost has been covered for you! You're going to be cured!"

How would you feel about this? Shocked, no doubt, and blessed. How about thankful? The ten men were healed of their leprosy at no cost to themselves. There were no side effects. The only prerequisite to their healing was that they listen to Jesus' word and do what He told them. Now this took faith! Why show themselves to the priest when nothing about their condition had changed? Right after Jesus talked with them, the patches of leprosy still showed up on their skin. But then on the way, they were cleansed! Their trust in Jesus was rewarded.

They were shocked. They felt blessed. But for whatever reason, they did not return to thank their Healer. Only one of them – the Samaritan – turned back praising and thanking God as He fell at Jesus' feet. But then the other nine lepers had a lot on their minds! Jesus told them to show themselves to the priest, and the process of being declared clean was time consuming. Besides, they missed their loved ones terribly. God wouldn't want them to delay their reunion, would He? He wouldn't discourage them from returning immediately to their homes and occupations.

Leprosy was a great equalizer. When the men had it, they together cried out for Jesus' mercy. But when their disease no longer troubled them, they forgot about Jesus. Jesus did not forget about them. "*Were not ten cleansed?*" He asked. "*Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?*"

Their ungratefulness should trouble us just as it troubled Jesus. We may even imagine that we would have been like the Samaritan. We would have returned to give thanks. But let's move the question from the theoretical to the actual. Jesus has not healed us from leprosy, but He has healed us from something far worse, something much more damaging than an infection. He has healed us from our sin.

This sin had left its mark on every inch of our body and soul. It had traveled through every vein. It saturated our heart. How could we be freed from its terrible effects? Some just let it be.

They act like it isn't there. They are like the guy with frostbite, who says he doesn't feel pain, but who can't move his fingers anymore either. Others figure they can address the sin on the inside by doing good works on the outside. But no matter how good a rotting board or rusted car looks with a new coat of paint, the issue underneath the paint will keep getting worse.

No human remedy could fix the problem of sin. Sin is a great equalizer, which affects all people the same. The harder we try to get rid of it ourselves, the deeper it sinks inside. We who are responsible for our sin are not qualified to remove it. And God wants us to know this. He wants us to admit our powerlessness over sin. He wants us to humbly acknowledge that we have a problem.

And God has the solution. The solution is His only Son. He sent His perfect Son to become Man. Sending His Son into the sinful world was something like a father pushing his healthy son into a leper colony. In that respect, Jesus did not belong here. He was far above this place, this world. He did not deserve to be sent in among sinners.

But He came willingly. He had compassion on His people. He saw their sorry state. He heard their cries for mercy. He came to save them. The only way to free them from their sin was to take their sins upon and into Himself. Their sin required a spotless Lamb, a perfect sacrifice. Jesus was that *"Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (Joh. 1:29). When He was nailed to the cross, all our sin was nailed there with Him. *"[B]y means of his own blood,"* He secured our *"eternal redemption"* (Heb. 9:12). He paid the price in full. He *"put away sin by the sacrifice of himself"* (v. 26).

This payment was made for all sinners. But an inheritance does a person no good unless he is informed about it. God distributes His salvation through the Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. He gives the blessings of Christ's death through the message of Christ's death. Now this Word of God does not appear to have much power. It does not make the pages of a Bible glow. It does not always seem to have a great effect on those who hear and read it. Jesus' Word to the lepers didn't seem effective either. But hearing His Word and believing it, the lepers were cleansed.

God promises that His Word will not return to Him empty (Isa. 55:11). It brings healing to the sick, comfort to the distressed, and peace to the hurting. And you know this in your own life. You know the relief you have when you lay your sins before Jesus and hear His Word of forgiveness absolving you of all your sins. You hear Him declare you clean and pure in His sight and an heir of eternal life. There is no spiritual bill of health we could receive that is better than this.

But it is easy to take God's grace for granted. We may think that we have heard this Gospel message plenty of times. We know what Jesus did for us. We don't need to hear about it again and again. We can go without the Word and Sacraments for a while. They will be there for us when we have time for them. And in this way, we see the availability of the Gospel something like the availability of oxygen. It's always there when we need it, so we don't need to give it much thought. "When I need an extra supply," we say, "I'll know where to find it."

Why don't we treasure these blessings of God more? Is it because they are too easy to get? Would we value them more if they were harder to come by? If that is the case, then we are saying we want some of the responsibility for making things right with God. Or is it actually that we want some of the credit? Those efforts all fail. We cannot get ourselves right with God. He made peace with us, and He brings us that peace through the means of grace.

And His grace is easy to get. Martin Luther wrote that if "forgiveness of all sin, grace, and eternal life" could come by picking up a piece of straw or by plucking out a feather, wouldn't we do this joyfully? Wouldn't we treasure and cherish those simple items? "Why then are we such disgraceful people," he asks, "that we do not regard the water of baptism, the bread and wine, that is, Christ's body and blood, the spoken word, and the laying on of man's hands for the forgiveness of sin as such holy possessions?" Why don't we appreciate that by these means, "he wishes to sanctify and save [us] in Christ?" ("On the Councils and the Church," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 41, p. 172).

By our sporadic or reluctant use of God's Word, we show that our spiritual health is not as valuable, not as pressing a concern, as it should be. We show ourselves to be ungrateful for the cleansing of sin carried out by the Lord. We overlook this blessing because our minds are often on other things, things that will not last.

And yet God has called us once again to receive the antidote for sin through His Word. He has not taken back His gifts from us. He has not cast us out because of our ungratefulness. He cleanses us today. He restores our spiritual health. He strengthens our faith so that we want to hear His Word more and serve Him more faithfully. He does this because we are valuable to Him. We are worth His time. He has mercy on us, and His mercy endures forever.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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