

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
18th Sunday after Pentecost
October 13, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Numbers 5:1-4

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 17:11-19 NRSV

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, 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 made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Separation, Alienation, and Another Nation

Many of us may feel **isolated** at various times in our lives. There is that first day at a new work place. Even if you stay in the same company, coming into a team that has worked together on a given project, you are the **outsider**. Some of you grew up in families that were in the military or who worked for large corporations. Moving to another town was a regular occurrence. Some may have been assigned to a new location in another country.

Even if these experiences are unknown to us, we can understand that being new in town or in a new school or in a country that speaks **another language**, can be very isolating. Despite those many hurdles of learning a new system of traffic flow and strange items for food choices in stores and restaurants, there is the **social** isolation. Your closest friends are hundreds, possibly thousands of miles away. You are pretty much **alone**.

With this in mind, you and I can only imagine the sequence of events that came upon someone with a **skin disease** in the ancient world. Although the skin disease of psoriasis gets a great deal of attention today, the scriptures do not describe it. But, in the ancient world practically any skin disease could be lumped into the general category of **leprosy**, a contagious disease that spreads through human contact. It is attributed to a specific form of bacterium which is related to the organism that causes tuberculosis. The resulting disease of leprosy affects the skin but, more specifically, the **nerves** so that there is no feeling in the fingers, toes, or nose as the infection slowly wreaks havoc with the supporting tissues. This leads to horrible loss of fingers, toes, and facial feature, such as the nose and ears. One of the earliest signs of leprosy is a **whitish patch** on the skin.

It is this sign of the disease in the skin that led to a whole series of stipulations in the **laws** as guidance for the people of the Hebrew nation. In fact, the disease was of such concern that the words “leper” and “leprosy” are mentioned **75 times** in the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament. And, once you were identified, you were **sent out** of the community altogether. If you can recall the scenes of the **leper colony** in the movie *Ben Hur*, you have an idea of how **miserable** life became for those with leprosy and so many other skin diseases.

Leprosy is still with us in isolated areas of developing and advancing nations today, being present in India and parts of Asia. It is **treatable** today, thankfully. The cause is a complex microbe called a mycobacterium. Since leprosy could spread over time, there was a great deal of time and energy spent on **identifying** these conditions in the ancient world. In an age without halogen light sources and magnifying lenses or electron microscopes, the Biblical record shows a great deal of detail on how to identify those affected with leprosy and various strategies of observation to **quarantine** and identify the less serious skin diseases. If declared unaffected by leprosy, these individuals could return to their **families** and, hopefully, to their livelihood.

So, we can learn from the **scriptures** dedicated to skin diseases. This should make for some great reading and Bible study, but I doubt that any of you are interested in this topic at the moment. Here is a brief summary:

- *Leviticus* 13:1-17 contains **general instructions** in dealing with leprous lesions.
- *Leviticus* 13:18-23 addresses **boils**, also known as “skin eruptions.”
- *Leviticus* 13:24-28 is concerned with **burns**.
- *Leviticus* 13:29-37 takes on **itching** diseases of the hair, scalp, or beard.
- *Leviticus* 13:38-39 gives guidance on various skin diseases, including **white spots**, now called leukoplakia.
- *Leviticus* 13:40-44 helps address concerns with **baldness** (alopecia).
- *Leviticus* 13:45-52 offers some particulars in dealing with those who are **leprous**.
- *Leviticus* 13:53-59 spells out details dealing with the **clothing** of the leprous.

Few of us here are scholars, but with this summary we can understand that this idea of leprosy and skin diseases had to be a **major concern** in the ancient world.

As we can see from all these descriptions, **separating** these affected individuals was a high priority. And, few if any of us have been through an actual quarantine for leprosy or anything else. Some of you may have had relatives who were diagnosed with tuberculosis, which was widespread and considered an **epidemic** at the beginning of the 20th century. Before there were effective medications, public health initiatives were instituted around the world, and they were effective in curbing the spread of this disease that affected the lungs, but also major joints and major blood vessels. In the TB hospitals, the patients were isolated from the population, but also received special nutrition, treatment, and support. So, you can see that government officials felt that it was in the best interest of the general population to **interrupt the lives** of a relative few in order to improve the health of the general population. And, **it worked!** Within a few years, the number of new cases of tuberculosis fell dramatically.

Of course, the lives of the affected individuals were **ruined**. The financial prospects of their families were severely affected. If the “breadwinner,” typically a man, was sent to a tuberculosis hospital, they would be **confined** there for isolation and treatment for months or even years. As a result, the family became destitute. If the patient was the mother or homemaker, then the children were deprived of an important parent during their growth and development. Often a relative would have to move in, or the **children** were sent away, producing even more hardship for the receiving family as they were barely getting by themselves. And, children with the disease in their formative years were separated from their parents and placed into collective wards where they received care, but perhaps **missed out** on a balanced experience of family. Their **education** suffered, as well, affecting their future employment and prospects.

Can any of us fully consider the **psychological damage** created by such isolation: withdrawal, **depression**, with resulting arresting of social and interpersonal skills. Unfortunately, conditions were even worse in the **ancient world**. We see an example of this in our scripture lesson: Jesus encounters the **Ten Lepers**, but they are at a distance. This is required by law, along with their shouting to all who are nearby, “Unclean! Unclean!” and, of course, everyone would **stay away!** Obeying the law and showing fear of the lepers, everyone following in the crowd stayed away. But, Jesus **astounded** everyone, because he saw an opportunity to do something **extraordinary**.

As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, 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 made clean.

Luke 17:12 NRSV

It was a healing, but it was also a **miracle**: They were **made clean**. According to the Hebrew law spelled out so meticulously in *Leviticus*, these **former lepers** could visit the priest and be declared “clean” again. There is an example of this in the classic movie, *Ben Hur*. The title character, played by Charlton Heston, was taken away as a criminal from his family in Jerusalem. In time, his father dies and his mother and sister are arrested. While in jail, they become **leprous** and are isolated in the **Vally of the Lepers**. Over time, Ben Hur is restored as a hero of the Roman Empire, and he returns to his home in Jerusalem, only to be told that these surviving family members are among the **living dead**. Recklessly, he finds them, and they are healed at the foot of **the cross** of the crucified **Jesus**.

Something on that order has occurred or the ten lepers **healed by Jesus** in our scripture lesson. Of course, the ten lepers respond with **overwhelming joy**. They are freed from a disease that was slowly killing them. In their healing, they are now **restored to society**, their families, perhaps even returning to useful employment. But, **only one** returns to see Jesus and **thank him**. The scripture says that he **raised his voice** in praising God, just as the Ten Lepers had raised their voices to Jesus when they saw him. And, points out that of all those cured, it is only the Samaritan who offers thanks and praises God, recognizing the true source of the miracle.

Many of you recall that the Samaritans are **Hebrew people** who split off from the formal worship in the temple and the kingdom of Judea. Many took up the old worship of Baal and other **pagan gods** in an attempt to fit in with the pagan societies that surrounded them. In effect,

these are people who **know God**, but are ritually **unclean** and are treated as unbelievers by the Jewish people of Palestine.

In providing us with this tale of **isolation, tragedy, and redemption**, the writer of the *Gospel of Luke* contrasts the main message to that of the priests and leaders of the early Hebrews. The writer is really not concerned with the disease of leprosy as much as the **humanity and brokenness** of the individuals who have contracted the disease. These verses make a powerful statement about **faith** and the **power of God** through Jesus Christ. And, this experience of love and power is possible for anyone! The clinching message in these verses can easily be that you can be a hated **Samaritan** covered in **leprosy**, but great things can still happen to you through the power of God in **Jesus Christ**.

As is typical for our sermons, our scripture lesson is taken from the *Revised Common Lectionary*, and these ordered, weekly assignments of the gospel story are provided for our consideration of the scope of this **journey of Jesus** with the disciples as they make their way through the countryside **to Jerusalem**. There Jesus will be confronted, **arrested**, tried, and executed as a **common criminal**. Of course, we know the very happy ending of **resurrection** that saves us all: God **raises Jesus** from the dead, Jesus **ascends** to heaven, resides there **in power** with God, and we are given **God's Spirit** to abide with us forever. All of that lies in front of the disciples and Jesus in our scripture lesson today. And, there is a **lot to learn** along the way as we progress each week toward Advent and the coming of Christ into the world.

As we have discussed in this particular lesson, we deal with the **separation and alienation** of the unfortunate persons affected by the devastating, contagious skin disease known as **leprosy**. In addition, we see that all of those affected by the miracle are **overjoyed** at the results. However, only the outsider, the **Samaritan**, the resident of **another nation**, returns to Jesus and **thanks him**. This message of **God's love** and power displayed in the person of Jesus is so overwhelming that even the worst disease imaginable can be **conquered**; and, the heart of those **furthest removed** from Judaism can be approached and **claimed by God**, as well.

Truly, the message is this: **Jesus is the hope of the world**. We have it all summed up for us right here. God has placed us here in this place, in this moment, all of us together, to continue to **convey that message**. But, that message is one of **compassion and love**, just as the gospel writer reveals it to us in our scripture lesson today.

We know that the **love of God** is expressed to us in **Jesus Christ**. And, the **power of God** remains in the **Risen Christ**. And, Christ is the reason, and the means, for **great things** to happen, wherever we are. Few of us deserve the many great blessings we receive. Like the Samaritan with leprosy, we can be grateful and then, work in God's kingdom and for **the church**, which is called and **led by Christ himself**.

Stan Reid © 2019