

When I was a kid, I prayed for a new bike. But then I learned prayer doesn't work like that. Good enough. So, I stole a bike. And I prayed for forgiveness.

Now, of course, prayer doesn't work like *that* either. Although many of us function with these kinds of misunderstandings regarding prayer—and the shape of our lives—and our relationship with God. We think we can convince Him to take our side—to do what we want—if we pray hard enough. And some of it may stem from a faulty reading of our Gospel reading today—the one about the ten lepers. So, let's read this passage well. And let's see what Jesus intends.

This story is unique to Luke's Gospel. We don't find it in any of the others—Matthew, Mark, John. And Luke first draws our attention to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. This is actually third time Luke mentions the journey. And Jesus is now moving—east to west—along the boundary between Samaria and Galilee. Jesus doesn't take the quickest or most direct route to Jerusalem. He goes with the Father's mission and by His direction. There are things he must accomplish as He travels.

Now, Jesus' miracles often come with cultural tension. He challenges both the poor theology and the societal bigotry of His hearers in this account. The main character here is both a leper and a Samaritan. Lepers were culturally isolated. Notices that they yell out to Jesus from a distance—a distance the Law required.

And Samaritans were disliked by the Jews. They were religiously unfaithful—and rather proud about it. They had intermarried with people of other religions—and were proud about that too. The idea of a Samaritan leper receiving God's help was shocking to the Jews. They had written off Samaritans and lepers as being beyond help.

As Jesus enters the village, He is approached by ten lepers. They ask Jesus for mercy. And this is a good start. It is a prayer we pray in our liturgy every week. And it is a common appeal from people to Jesus in the New Testament. Of course, they have heard that He had been performing miracles. And they would like more of the same for themselves. They want to be healed.

And of course, He does. Jesus is compassionate in ways we can't even understand. But this miracle is also something more. It is a sign of the presence of the Word of God in their midst. It is a sign of His coming kingdom—of what He will do in the end. It is about so much more than the lives of these ten men.

Now, the whole story shifts with the response of one of these lepers. As we heard, they are all healed. And the others are obedient. Jesus sent them to Jerusalem—and they continue on their way—joyful and healed. But in Jesus' words that we heard last week—that come immediately before our text, “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

Something more is necessary. And we see it in the one who turns back. And the whole thing ends with Jesus saying to this man—that He had healed from leprosy, “Rise and go, your faith has made you well.” And if we try to apply this one line alone—in isolation from the story—we end up thinking that if we have enough faith, we can be

healed of our diseases too. If we have enough faith, we can get all of our problems to go away.

But as I said last week, faith in this sense isn't really quantifiable. Faith is trust—trust in Jesus—trust in what He has actually promised. And either we have it or we don't. Sure, we should learn to trust Him more and more—and especially when things are hard. But, having enough faith doesn't mean you can make manifest the reality that you want.

And we can see this in the fact that all ten lepers in our passage receive what Jesus provides. Jesus sends them off to Jerusalem—to show themselves clean to the temple priests—as the Law of Moses requires. As I said, they are all obedient. They all leave His presence still in their leprosy. And on the way they are all healed.

It is as Jesus says, “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” It isn't their obedience that brings God's blessings. It isn't that they pleaded enough. It isn't even their faith that brings this miracle. It is God's purpose that makes these unclean men clean again. It is a sign of what Jesus is doing in the world. And we would do well to pay attention. God will do much more of this at Christ's second coming.

But there is something very different about the man—this Samaritan leper—who returns. He breaks from the crowd. The priests' declaration of purity can wait. Normal life can wait—just a little longer. Full of praise for God—he goes back to Jesus. He falls at His feet—and offers thanksgiving to God for His good and perfect gift.

Jesus then reminds us that ten were healed. He wants everyone to notice the nine. His question is piercing, “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” It seems only one leper actually understood what was happening.

The word for *foreigner* is interesting. It means something like—*of another generation*. It is used with religious overtones—something like *pagan* or *heathen*. Or it can refer to someone who is not local—a *stranger* or an *exile*. It is a little hostile—in its normal usage. And Jesus just does this sometimes. He picks up on the way that people see each other. He uses our own language—our own way of thinking against us—and yet for our good—at the same time.

Jesus hearers—probably even His Disciples—didn't like this man because he was a Samaritan. But Jesus is saying that there are bigger categories of identity. We often stereotype people by where they are from—or where they are not from. We do it in politics—and even with our religious affiliation. And Jesus won't let us get away with it. This leper—this Samaritan—this person they didn't like—is closer to the kingdom of God than the nine Jewish men who didn't bother to come back.

And Jesus' follow-up remark is similar to what we heard in chapter seven—months ago. There, Jesus commends the centurion for his faith, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” This man was willing to trust in Jesus' authority to heal—without His actual presence. The centurion is Roman—not Jewish.

And here, the Samaritan leper is commended for his gratitude. He says to him, “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

Jesus does two things here. He commends the example of gratitude in the Samaritan—and we will come back to that. And he shows that the response to Him can come from unexpected people—Romans, tax collectors, sinners—and even Samaritans. In some cases, those most sensitive to the Gospel—those most deeply committed to the values of the kingdom of God—are found among the foreigners—the outsiders—the exiles—those who do not fit in.

Jesus then issues a final encouraging commendation. He tells the man that his faith has made him well. Of course, this does not mean that he had enough faith to be healed of leprosy—as if his faith was the cause of his healing. Remember all ten were healed. Instead, Jesus is talking about healing the way He usually does—as something much bigger than the condition of our bodies.

This Samaritan man had the kind of faith that saves. Jesus indicates the presence of salvation that leads to forgiveness, eternal life, and future glory. This man understood what this miracle proclaims. He doesn't value the gift over the Giver—but he also understands what the gift means. God's salvation stands before Him in Jesus Christ. And the very best place for him to be is kneeling before his Savior in faith.

And here, faith looks an awful lot like gratitude. The Gospel of Luke is filled with those who take time to thank and praise Jesus Christ for His indescribable gifts. And gratitude isn't happiness exactly—it is more like contentment, appreciation, and patience—mixed with faith. But there are some similarities in the way gratitude and joy appear in this world.

C.S. Lewis once said, and this is worth thinking about, “I begin to suspect that the world is divided not only into the happy and the unhappy, but into those who like happiness and those who, odd as it seems, really don't.”

We have all met that person who is just discontent and ungrateful. Maybe we are that person. And then, we have become competitive in our suffering. We compare our pain to see who has it worse. And the one with the worst pain wins. But this is no way to live. And it is the opposite of joy—the opposite of gratitude.

And for us, Gratitude is a necessary moral virtue. It is a practice of courage, especially in the face of suffering. It is an antidote to resentment and bitterness. And it improves our lives by helping to develop resilience and hope in God's promises. Gratitude is not about pretending everything is perfect—it is about finding the light of Christ even in dark places.

And gratitude takes seriously what Jesus says here, “Your faith has made you well.” Maybe the illness has not gone away. Maybe we will still find ourselves outsiders in the community in which we live. Maybe we will be rejected for the religious stands that we take. Life can be messy and difficult sometimes.

But it's okay. Difficulties can be God's good gifts to us. They can be accepted with joy. Besides, our sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ. Christ has made us new. And He will come again to set all things right—just as His Word and these miraculous signs declare.

And so, we follow in the footsteps of this Samaritan leper—of all people. We bow before the Savior in thanks and praise. We rejoice in His gracious promises. We are grateful for the presence of His kingdom right there in front of us—in His Word and

Sacraments. And this makes us content. We can wait because we are full of faith in what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do at the end.

So, let the words of Jesus resonate in your ears. Let them shape your faith into the kind of faith that trusts Jesus in all things. “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*