

Our Old Testament lesson and our Gospel reading for today, remind us of life in the pre-scientific world, where diseases like leprosy could spread unchecked within a community. For centuries there were people who were afflicted with all sorts of diseases and conditions that today, with the help of the scientific and medical community, no one ever need fear again. Leprosy, which is today called “Hanson’s Disease” is not something we hear much of, except for in the Bible, but millions of people around the world still suffer from it, including a few hundred every year in the United States.

It results in terrible weakness and decay of the feet and hands, and of the ears and nose, so that they fall off or become like stubby claws or clubs. Eventually, leprosy will lead to a slow, painful death. There are pictures online of lepers being treated by medical missionaries, and the scariest part is not the limbs or the skin falling off, but it is their faces, the look of absolute hopelessness and loneliness in their eyes.

In the Bible, in the book of Leviticus, it lists several public health regulations for people who get leprosy: they must leave their spouses, their families, their homes, their town, and live totally alone far away from everyone. They may not come to the temple, or join others in worshipping God. They could not come within 50 feet of any person.

People with leprosy had to wear special clothing, shake bells, or shout out the word “unclean” ahead of them, so that they would have no contact with the unafflicted. They were completely isolated from other people, rejected from their community, and so it’s not a surprise that many families would hold funeral services for a loved one with leprosy, even when they were still alive, because as lepers they were good as dead.

These were people who were born with real hopes and dreams – they once walked with purpose and meaning with their peers, and now due to an accident of being in some place or other, where they contracted this disease, their lives were as good as over.

In our text for today, 10 people with leprosy are calling out to Jesus. Ten people, isolated from their families they once knew. Ten who lived with the pain of both their physical condition and the pain of ostracism from the world. Exhausted and friendless, they call out to Jesus. “Jesus...Master...have mercy.”

I don’t know if those words ring a bell for you, but for over 2000 years Christians have included in their worship these same words, the words of the lepers, “Lord, have mercy”, “Jesus, have mercy”, “Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer”. We may not have skin issues, but the loneliness, the hopelessness, the desperateness of the lepers we can relate to.

If the illness of leprosy affects only some, the illness of sin affects us all and we all know what it is to feel rejected by those we love, to feel unworthy in the presence of God, to be isolated from others, and to watch our own lives decay away and to helplessly contribute to it. We all have a leper's heart, although we may only acknowledge it in our most vulnerable times.

Well these ten lepers were in one of those times. They were not too proud to come before Jesus, because they have no other options. I've heard it claimed that we really learn how to pray when that's the only thing we have left. So maybe in spite of themselves, maybe in their quietest voice, maybe with the tiniest mustard seed of faith, they cry out in faith to Jesus, trusting that he can work it out, that he is able, that it's all in his hands, and that he can bring the healing they're so desperate for.

So Jesus tells them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests," that is go and show your skin to the temple official who will certify that you are clean, that you're cured, that you can be admitted back into society, back to life. And as they obediently went on their way, as they went off with their mustard seed sized faith, they were made clean. Made right. Made whole, Made pure. Made guiltless. Their skin soft and smooth like a newborn's.

What do you think that would have been like? To be remade? To be reborn? To be able to stand up straight and proud, to hold your loved ones, to be back in your home, back at work, back at church, to be brought back from the land of the dead to the land of the living?

Well, God has done just that to you this morning; anyone washed in the water of baptism, anyone with a mustard seed sized faith planted in their life has been healed, made whole, remade, reborn! We don't always get cures in this life, but wherever Jesus promises and we believe, there is healing!

So all ten lepers go on their way this morning, all ten ex-lepers who were healed this morning. And nine go on to do whatever they had dreamed about during those long lonely nights. Nine focus on what's next for me. The nine were healed, their skin smooth and beautiful, but deep-down they still kind of remained lepers, stuck in themselves, trapped, alone, and isolated again.

But one leper, identified as a Samaritan, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he knelt down right at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.

Do we recognize a moment of grace when it happens to us? If so, how does that grace transform us? These seem to be the lingering questions behind the story of the healing of the ten lepers.

You see, this is a story about how we understand our lives. It implies two fundamental ways of being in this world; one assumes that my life and all that fills my life is simply what I'm more or less entitled to. You can only guess that those nine lepers who disappeared from view without so much as a "Thank you, sir", honestly felt that good health was their right (and that it had been a long time coming). It's not gift. They simply had it owed to them...

"The Samaritan leper who returns and drops to his knees before Jesus is a living emblem of the other perspective toward being. His thankfulness is actually a life stance, a fundamental attitude that says, "Here I am, alive and whole. I might never have been, but here I am. I did nothing to deserve life. It's a gift. It's grace."

Of course, very few of us ever fall completely into one of these categories or the other. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the giftedness of life, and at other times we find ourselves consumed by concerns about fairness and senses of entitlement. Sometimes we recognize the grace for what it is; at other times we don't.

Henry Ward Beecher, a nineteenth century American preacher, used a wonderful image to describe what it means to live a life of gratitude:

"Suppose someone gave you a dish of sand mixed with some fine iron filings. You look for the filings with your eyes; you comb for them with your fingers. But you can't find them. Then you take a tiny magnet and draw it through the dish. Suddenly the magnet is covered with iron filings. The ungrateful person is like our hands combing the sand. Such a person finds nothing to be thankful for. The grateful person, on the other hand, is like the magnet sweeping through the sand; that person finds hundreds of things to be thankful for. And for that

The recognition of grace is not a matter of how much one has. We have all known people who had almost everything they could ever want or need, and yet lived with some great emptiness; and we have known others who seemed to have less than a little, whose lives nonetheless demonstrated a remarkable peace and contentment and fullness.

So as we are faced with this miraculous, life-changing story of healing, we recognize the face of God, for God is grace, and for that we give thanks. What else can we do, but embrace the healing, life-giving presence that has given you another day to give thanks and praise. Amen.

