

Saved to Praise (Luke 17:11-19)

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who has cleansed us from our sins. Amen!

This morning's Gospel recounts the story of Jesus cleansing the ten lepers. After directing them to go and show themselves to the priests, we read this about one of the ten, "*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.*" This morning we consider this text and the theme: Saved to Praise. Let us pray.

Oh Lord of life and death, we pray that your unbounded Word of life would go forth from my lips this day to heal and to save, to cleanse and to restore, that we might join the Samaritan leper in praising you at the feet of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen!

It would be hard to overstate the kind of social and even spiritual alienation that lepers experienced in the ancient world. Excluded from the community and barred from worship in the temple, lepers were forced to live their lives in isolation, both from God and from their neighbors. Thus, when we encounter them in this morning's Gospel, Luke includes the detail that Jesus "*was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance...*" And I know this is a bit heavy for an introduction to a sermon, but I think we need to sit with that detail for a minute. Our text and theme for this morning reflect on what we are saved *for*, what we are saved *to do*: we are saved to praise the Lord God. But before we get there we need to attend to what we are saved *from*. You see, there is a direct relationship between our understanding of our plight and our experience of the salvation that Jesus brings. And the plight of the lepers in this morning's Gospel provides a helpful window into our plight as sinners before God. So back to the lepers...

Jesus is making his way into this village and there they are, standing together off in the distance, probably on the outskirts of the village. Old Testament law actually stated that lepers had to live apart from the community. We don't really know what leprosy was in the ancient world, but it probably had no relation to what we now call leprosy. Whatever physical symptoms may have characterized it, the main feature of leprosy in the ancient world was as a kind of social disease. Lepers were the ancient untouchables. And as such leprosy functioned as a kind of symbolic representation of the contagious and corrosive effects of human sin. Sin separates from God and from

one another as it spreads from Adam and Eve to the whole human race, generation after generation. So as we consider those lepers, standing at a distance, we're given a picture of the kind of alienation that sin introduces to our lives.

And I wonder if any of you have come here this morning feeling the weight of that alienation, of that distance? Perhaps you dragged yourself in here and you're here physically, but in your heart of hearts you feel like you belong out in the parking lot, in your heart you feel like you are a million miles away, both from God and from your brothers and sisters in Christ. Sin is like that. It alienates and it excludes. It can hinder us from experiencing true fellowship with God and with our neighbor. We can feel almost as if we've contracted a disease; we're damaged goods and it's just better if we remain apart because if people knew what we're really like, well, they wouldn't like or accept us. So better to just cut to the chase and exclude ourselves.

Now if you've come here feeling like this or if this has been your experience in the past and I trust that all of us, if we have any level of self-awareness, know this to be the case;...I mean, to the degree that we understand the depth of our sinful condition, not just the sins that we think, say, and do, but the sinful nature that causes St. Paul to cry out, "*Wretched man that I am!*" in Romans 7:24, the sin that *we are* in Adam; to the degree that we understand that, we all belong out in the parking lot. In Adam, we're not just a million miles away from God and one another, but rather an infinite gulf has been fixed between us; one that can only be overcome by the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so I say to you all, let us attend. Let attend to the cry of these lepers and to our Lord's response to them.

What do they cry out? They cry out, "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.*" They cry out, "Lord, have mercy." Note that they do not cry out simply for healing, but for mercy. Obviously, they are seeking healing, but a healing that restores them to God and the community. This theme comes through loud and clear in our Lord's concluding words to the one leper who turns back, when he says, "*Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.*" That word translated as "well" is the standard Greek word for salvation. The faith of this Samaritan leper not only cleansed him of his leprosy, but saved him from sin and death, restored him to God and neighbor. So that's where we're headed, but how do we get there? Well, in response to the leper's cries, Jesus directs them, "*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*" Now, the priests were in the temple, but lepers weren't allowed to enter the temple. So what is our Lord saying? He's telling them to do something that was impossible for them to do. And yet, it

is in their going, as they demonstrated some level of faith in the word of the Lord, that Luke tells us, *“And as they went they were cleansed.”* What was impossible for them was possible with God.

Now, it's here that the story, quite literally, takes a turn. For Luke tells us that *“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.”* For whatever reason, this Samaritan, one whom first century Jews regarded as a kind of half-breed, he alone turned back. Surely the other nine noticed that they too were healed, but only the Samaritan truly “sees” this, comes to terms with what happened and whom it is who healed him, and what he ought to do in response. Notice though, that this turning to praise and to give thanks is instinctive. He doesn't have to be told to do it. It is the natural response in light of the great deliverance that he has experienced. I mean, can you even imagine what he must have been thinking and feeling? All of the stigma and alienation that he had experienced for who knows how long, vanished in an instant. Just like that, the Lord not only cleansed him, but also delivered and restored him.

And yet perhaps there's another reason why he turned back. Remember, he's a Samaritan and that means he can't follow the OT protocols and go show himself to the priest in the temple because Samaritans weren't allowed to do that. But in the end, whether he knows it or not, he does the better thing. For in turning back to praise God at the feet of Jesus, he presented himself to the Great High Priest who was on his way to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice of his sinless body on the cross and whose blood would wash away the sins of the world. In falling at the feet of Jesus, he bowed himself in the presence of the true temple, which being torn down in his death on the cross, was to be raised up three days later in his resurrection, as our Lord himself predicted.

And in doing all of this, in his turning to praise God and in his falling at the feet of Jesus to give him thanks, the Samaritan leper left us a pattern. Indeed, it is one that we follow every week. Each and every week as the Lord gathers us around his Word and his gifts, we are given the opportunity to see that we have been healed and turn back to the Lord in praise and thanksgiving. That, my brothers and sisters, is what we are doing in this gathering. When we gather together and make confession of our sins, those sins that threaten to undo us, that threaten to alienate us from God and from one another, leaving us on the outskirts, our Lord speaks his word of pardon and deliverance saying: “I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In speaking those words to us, he is cleansing and restoring to the righteousness that he bestowed upon in our baptism into his death and resurrection. And our response is praise. Furthermore in just a moment

here, we will be giving the opportunity to fall down at the feet of Jesus in the Sacrament of Altar to have that word of promise not only spoken to us, but delivered into our bodies and souls under the forms of bread and wine. And again our response is praise, literally, “Thank the Lord and sing his praise” will be the song on our lips. So you see, my brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our vocation as Christians; we have been saved to praise.

And now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Pr. Beaton