

## I. Introduction

### A. Ten were healed ... only one came back!

1. All ten of the people Jesus healed in this story were lepers ... afflicted by one of the most miserable diseases of their day
2. I know in today's world, it's better to refer to "people who have leprosy", but that would tongue-tie me, as many times as it appears in this sermon. So w/ apologies, I'll use the old-fashioned term today.
3. In those days, leprosy was a terrifying thing ... but it's something that doesn't terrify or repulse us today

### B. What the Bible calls "leprosy" referred to a variety of disfiguring & debilitating skin diseases, **but it probably was NOT what we call leprosy today (Hansen's disease)**

1. Leprosy was for biblical times what the bubonic plague was for the middle ages ... what AIDS was only 25 years ago
2. In Jesus' day, they knew nothing of leprosy's causes nor of the links of basic sanitation with diseases
3. So ... terrible things happened to lepers
  - a) Blotches broke out on their face & all over ... Skin became discolored ... They might experience great pain & die a premature death

## II. But the most terrible things to happen to lepers were not the disease symptoms, but the way they were treated

### A. As a leper in Jesus' day you were considered dirty & distasteful

1. You were a Jewish outcast ... needing your own colony to live in
2. You were identified by your open sores & dirty bandages ... with no one willing to hire you, you had to beg for food to live on
3. Worst of all, in social situations you always had to remain at a distance, apart from everybody else
  - a) You couldn't even live in the same town or encampment with your family, much less live in the same tent or house
  - b) If anyone approached, it was your duty to warn them by yelling out as loud as you could "UNCLEAN, UNCLEAN!"
  - c) If you got too close, people might throw stones at you

## **B. Only one thing could possibly be worse for any leper in Jewish society in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine: being a Samaritan**

1. In Jewish eyes, Samaritans were lowly, hated half-breed people to begin with. Yet one of the ten lepers in this story is the worst of the worst: he's a Samaritan AND a leper!
2. Sickness and tragedy can bring together the strangest of people
  - a) There was no reason for these ten to hang around together if they didn't have leprosy ... certainly the Samaritan and the nine Jews would not have associated with each other
  - b) But this dreaded disease gave them a common lot & a common fate
3. Yet Jesus healed them ... ALL ten of them
  - a) Jesus literally saved their lives and restored their dignity! You'd certainly think some gratitude was in order, right?
  - b) Yet ONLY ONE came back to give thanks & to praise God with a loud voice ... ONLY ONE!

## **C. Have you ever wondered what happened to the other nine?**

### **III. That's the question I want to focus on this morning: "What happened to the other nine?"**

#### **A. Let's use our imaginations a little bit**

1. With some help from a friend of mine who was a Lutheran pastor, and from an old sermon by the British Anglican pastor Martin Bell, let's try imaginatively finishing the story of those other nine lepers <http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=61838>
2. Jesus himself asks the question "Where are the other nine?"
3. Without a direct biblical basis, please humor me with a few speculative suggestions of what happened to the other nine:

#### **B. The 1<sup>st</sup> of the nine lepers who didn't come back was, quite simply ... a Samaritan-hater**

1. One easy way to understand this story is to assume that the other nine lepers failed to return precisely because the 1<sup>st</sup> healed person to thank Jesus was from Samaria
2. From many other Gospel stories we know how much Jews and Samaritans despised and distrusted each other
  - a) Perhaps the other nine Jewish men saw that Samaritan returning to talk to Jesus, & their old racist and religious biases kicked in

- b) After all, if they were going to suddenly be accepted back into Jewish society and their families again, they were not about to jeopardize that by associating with a Samaritan!

### **C. The second of the nine lepers ... was scared**

1. That's all ... just plain scared. He didn't understand what had happened, & that made him very afraid
2. He had always been like that, even before the leprosy. Life had hurt him & scared him. In many ways his fear had taken hold of him even more strongly than the disease itself.
3. Now after encountering Jesus, the disease was gone, but the fear stayed with him & he couldn't shake it & couldn't understand it
  - a) So he did what he did best: he ran away & looked for a place to hide
  - b) So much in life had scared him. Now Jesus scared him too.
4. The 2<sup>nd</sup> leper didn't come back, because he was on the run ... as scared as scared could be

### **D. The 3<sup>rd</sup> did not come back, because he was offended**

1. He was offended because he had nothing to do with the miracle that healed him ...
  - a) He expected to have to do something very difficult or costly before he could be healed ... but he had done nothing. Nothing was asked of him!
  - b) It was all too easy! He hadn't earned his reward one bit! His motto had always been, "You get what you pay for, and you earn your own way!"
2. So Jesus had offended him. Jesus had taken away his dignity
3. He couldn't accept this healing. He would never say "thank you" if Jesus was going to heal him like this!

### **E. The 4<sup>th</sup> leper realized something. Too late, he realized ... that he hadn't really wanted to be healed!**

1. He realized that without his leprosy, he didn't know what to do ... or how to live ... or even who he was
2. Although he had prayed fervently to God to be cured, he now saw how much he needed the leprosy ...
3. Like an insecure criminal who ends up back in prison again because he can't live outside of confinement, the fourth healed leper used that leprosy literally and figuratively as a crutch
  - a) In fact, it had defined him. He couldn't live without it.

b) He needed something even this disgraceful just to be somebody ... to not be a nobody.

4. So now that he was healed, he had no idea who he was. Jesus had taken away his identity. (*sarcastically*) "Thanks a lot, Jesus!"

### **F. The 5<sup>th</sup> leper, now healed, didn't come back because ... he was concerned about his appearance**

1. It may seem hard to believe, but people have always used that excuse to stay away from the presence of God

2. Today we might say, "How silly! God wants your heart & your whole life, not your wardrobe." But the 5<sup>th</sup> leper did not believe this.

a) Even with his body healed and this mighty miracle so fresh in his mind, he thought that his clothes looked just terrible

b) "Was he going to go back to God's temple and the priests in these tattered rags, looking like this?" he said. "Never!"

3. Well, he did mean to go back again ... after some new clothes & maybe a haircut & a shave ... He meant to go back... but of course, he never did.

### **G. It's difficult to explain why the 6<sup>th</sup> leper didn't return to say thanks ... perhaps because it's such a simple reason. Why, we hesitate to even talk about it: In a word, the 6<sup>th</sup> leper didn't return ... because HE FORGOT!**

1. In the delirium of his great joy at being healed, he just forgot!

2. You know, like a thank you note after a special gift, sometimes you forget ... That's all.

3. And when he finally remembered, he couldn't do anything at that point. Jesus was long gone somewhere else, & he was so embarrassed!

a) He didn't want anyone to know that he just forgot!

b) Staying away was easier than apologizing to Jesus for what he overlooked.

### **H. The 7<sup>th</sup> leper was the one ... who was unable to say "thank you" anymore, to anyone!**

1. You see, there is something that happens to a person who must beg for food, & repeatedly yell "Unclean!" before the rest of the world

2. Something strange happens to one who is treated like an animal ...or even worse, treated like he doesn't exist at all

3. When you've had your dignity ground into the dirt ...
  - a) When you've been reduced to a nothing and a nobody ...
  - b) When you're expected to grovel & say "thank you" when someone tosses you a few stale bread crumbs or a rotten piece of meat ...
  - c) And when it happens time after time, over and over, finally ...
  - d) YOU JUST CAN'T SAY IT ANYMORE
4. So the 7<sup>th</sup> leper doesn't say "thank you" anymore ... to anybody ... not even to Jesus. He's just been beaten down too much!

### I. The 8<sup>th</sup> leper ... was a skeptic

1. He didn't believe that Jesus personally caused his healing
  - a) He knew he'd been cured of that terrible disease – but "why" and "how" were his big questions. He kept trying to figure out how Jesus could have done that!
  - b) Certainly he didn't believe in hocus pocus or magic or miracles
  - c) There had to be a perfectly intelligible explanation for what had happened ... but it couldn't have been Jesus himself. It had to be a coincidence that Jesus had been around
2. If he didn't understand the "how" and the "why" of something, then he just wouldn't buy it!
3. The 8<sup>th</sup> leper didn't return, because *he would never give Jesus the credit for his healing*. It just didn't make sense!

### J. The 9<sup>th</sup> and last leper not to return didn't come back ... precisely because he DID believe that Jesus had healed him, & boy was he excited!

1. Like many devout Jews, he believed in the prophecies of the coming Messiah
  - a) So with miracles like this, this just had to be the Judgment Day – THE MESSIAH HAD JUST APPEARED!
  - b) and God's triumph must have now arrived!
  - c) "This was extraordinary!" he said. "No regular rabbi could have done this!"
  - d) And so he was just sure that the End Times had come, & God was taking over the world to set things right
2. How could he stop & return to give thanks when THE KINGDOM OF GOD WAS SO CLOSE AT HAND?

- a) This was too important for him to just stand around being polite!
- b) So he ran to be the first to spread the news: "The end is here! The end is here!"

3. The 9<sup>th</sup> leper did not return, because he was just too busy telling about what happened to him.

- a) He was too busy on a mission, to return just to say thanks.
- b) Or as we might rephrase it today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: He was too preoccupied with the end times & the return of Jesus in glory, to actually return to Jesus in gratitude!

## IV. Summary

### A. So ten were healed ... & only one returned

1. Why did the one return? Why did he do it? Couldn't he have found an excuse equal to any we've just talked about?
2. Aren't there always "good reasons" why we don't do the right thing? Aren't there always some excuses why we don't return to thank the Lord?

### B. Of course there are ... all sorts of reasons we come up with for not coming back to thank Jesus

1. For we today are a lot more like those lepers in the story than we admit. God may not have healed us from some dreaded disease – but God has healed us (& helped us) with a lot of other things:
  - a) God has given us homes ... livelihoods ... families ... & love
  - b) In our weakness, God has given us strength & courage & patience
  - c) In an ever more self-centered & meaningless world, God has given us precious hope and meaning ...
  - d) And most of all, God has given us salvation through Jesus the healer!
2. Have we today been blessed any less than the ten lepers? Not at all. Ten were healed ... One returned. One said, "Thank you, Lord ..." Nine said nothing. (*Tie yellow ribbon on lamp*)

### C. Now it's our turn, as we conclude this "Practicing Faith" series, just before the Thanksgiving holiday.

1. This has not been a worship series to just give you some theological ideas to ponder.
  - a) This has been a spiritual practices series, intended to encourage you to put your faith into action, in actions such as ...

- (1) fasting, spiritual companionship, & Scripture study,
- (2) Actions such as celebration, prayer, and hospitality

## 2. Today I'm inviting you to the practice of gratitude, or giving thanks

- a) When my wife Janette was a young girl, she would sometimes complain about something at home (as all kids do),
  - (1) At those times, her father had a characteristic response he would always give to complainers in the family:
  - (2) He would look at them and ask, "*Do you have an attitude of gratitude?*" Every child knew what the correct answer was.
- b) Having "an attitude of gratitude" is a good goal ... it's a good thing for us to aspire to

## 3. But an even better aspiration would be the "practice of gratitude", which is more about giving thanks than just "thinking thanks"

- a) Practicing gratitude means concretely doing thankful actions, expressing your thankfulness to God or to others, in words or deeds
- b) In our house, Janette often accuses me of using big fancy words when I can't give a definition for them. There is some truth to that accusation.
- c) But I have sometimes heard from her mouth strange new words that are totally made up, words she just created for the moment

## V. Conclusion:

**A. So here's my parting exhortation to you**, with a nod of credit to my father-in-law, and to my wife who isn't the only one who can make up words:

**B. This Thanksgiving weekend, let the thing your family & friends notice about you be your "Actitude of Gratitude". Amen**

*Song of Response: One way we can practice our gratitude is to sing a song of thanks to God. Today we will hear [heard] in nurture hour from Karsten Hess, and Rachel & Eldon Stoltzfus about their recent visit to our partners at Benin Bible Institute, in West Africa. 12 or 13 years ago, when we hosted some Beninese guests with us here, the BBI Administrator Bonaventure Akowanou taught us a simple little Beninese chorus to sing, called "Thank you, Jesus" A few of you may remember it, but I will refresh our memory as we sing it to God together.*

*We will sing each verse both in English then in French. If you don't speak French ... neither do I, but just join in as best you can. God is paying attention to your gratitude more closely than to your French! Feel free to clap along, or play a percussion instrument from the baskets up front.*