

SLD10.14.07 28th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 17:11-19
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"A Presbyterian Leper"

Our story this morning opens with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Week after week, the gospel of Luke has Jesus traveling a little further down the road toward his destiny. Today we're told that Jesus is journeying through the region between Samaria and Galilee, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense - it'd be like saying Jesus heading to Atlanta though the region between Blue Ridge and North Georgia. Some commentaries point to Luke's "geographical ineptitude." Being somewhat geographically inept myself, I'm inclined to overlook Luke's smaller inaccuracies in favor of the larger purpose of his protracted description of Jesus' slow but eventful journey to Jerusalem, which is to highlight the importance of both Jesus' destination and his destiny. For as we know, once in Jerusalem, Jesus will suffer, die and be raised to glory, and salvation will be accomplished once and for all. *Once and for all.* Remember that. Of course, that's later.

Meanwhile, the way today's story goes, somewhere north of Jerusalem Jesus enters a village where this gaggle of lepers approaches him. There are ten of them coming near, though not *too* near, in accordance with the law. Socially "unclean," the lepers are required to keep a certain distance from anyone who does not share their disease. So from that proscribed distance, the lepers holler out to Jesus, calling him by name: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

To which Jesus responds by telling them to go to show themselves to the priests at the synagogue.

This, too, is in accordance with Mosaic Law. For in Leviticus 13:49 it is written that

"if the disease... is a leprous disease (meaning any number of skin diseases), then it shall be shown to the priest." The priest is then to examine the symptoms to determine whether the disease is infectious or not. If it is, he then pronounces the new (marginalized) social status of the diseased one, and prescribes the appropriate ritual remedies.

"Show yourselves to the priests" advises Jesus, and the lepers, no doubt also familiar with the law, all comply.

Only, on their way to the synagogue, before the lepers even *get* to the priests, something astonishing happens – the lepers are all miraculously cured of their disease! Cured of their symptoms and made well. Cured, too, of their stigma and "made clean." That is, restored to their place in their community. Before the lepers even arrive at the synagogue, they are healed – receiving restoration both of body and of community.

Curiously, though, only one of the ten lepers, turns back to thank Jesus and praise God for this miracle of restoration. Only one of the healed ones returns to Jesus to thank him for the miracle of his salvation. Despite the astonishing miracle all ten lepers experienced, only one, the Presbyterian, throws himself at Jesus' feet in praise and thanksgiving.

Responding with puzzlement to the man prostrate at his feet, Jesus asks the folks standing around: "Hey, what's the deal? Weren't there ten lepers made clean? What became of the other nine? How come none of *them* came back to thank me and praise God...except this Presbyterian from *Samaria*?"

Now, it was the "from Samaria" part that would have made the biggest impression on those first listening to Jesus' story, because those first listeners were all Jews from Judea.

And Jews from Judea had split from their fellows in Samaria a long while back on a couple non-negotiable matters like worshipping other gods and, equally unacceptable, worshipping God at a shrine on the mountain of Gerizim in direct competition with the Temple in Jerusalem. Bottom line, Judean Jews had no time for Samaritans, leprous or otherwise. And of all the cured lepers, only the *Samaritan* responds appropriately to Jesus' miracle cure? Sometimes you gotta wonder if Jesus says stuff just to make people mad.

Anyway, before anybody has a chance to express their umbrage, Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

A *Samaritan's* faith has made him well? Someone who believes so differently than Jesus' listeners, and on such controversial matters? Now we're talking rubbing it in.

Full of scandalous twists and turns, Luke's tale seems intentionally designed either to offend its listeners, or to surprise them into new understandings of the nature of God's grace – depending, I suppose, on just how invested they are in their own credos of right and wrong. In fact, throughout the gospels Jesus seems forever throwing curve balls to the faithful as if to remind us how God keep doing whatever God pleases with whomever God bloody well pleases to do it. We Presbyterians call this "the sovereignty of God" and, as Jesus' early listeners, often find it annoyingly unmanageable and unorthodox, even (dare we admit it?) offensive.

Truth is, Luke's tale of the cleansing of the lepers highlights a lot of what we believe as Presbyterians, which is really what I want to explore today.

Let me begin with a little history and than we'll come back to Luke's tale. Many of you know already that John Calvin, 16th century scholar, priest and Catholic reformer, is the

father of what is called “Reformed Theology,” a way of thinking about God and Jesus and humanity that emerged from the religious reformations in Europe in the 16th century.

Calvin was an outspoken French Catholic attorney and theologian who expressed outrage at the abuses of the French Catholic Church and its power-hungry hierarchy in Rome at the time. Appalled by the ignorance of both clerics and the populace, Calvin detested both the lack of education and the fear with which the church was able to hold the ignorant hostage.

In particular, the sale of indulgences – that is, “pardon for a price” – enriched the coffers of the church even as it manipulated and impoverished simple peasants who were taught they could pay their way out of the threatening flames of hell.

After submitting passionate appeals for reform to both the ecclesial and the royal hierarchies of his native France, Calvin was forced to flee his native country to escape persecution for his radical ideas. Setting up shop in Geneva, Switzerland, Calvin became the functional and titular head of both the church and the town (he wouldn’t have understood the separation of church and state we have today). There in Geneva Calvin further developed his ideas about reformed theology, writing them all down in his famous two volume-tome, the Institutes of the Christian Religion. Note well that title, The Institutes, for there’s not a Presbyterian pastor preaching from this pulpit who hasn’t spent endless sleepless nights contemplating the dry, weighty, wordy, and occasionally conflictual wisdom of its content. In roughly 1500 pages of very small print, Calvin systematically expounds from a reformed perspective every Christian doctrine in the book, his thought guiding much of what we, as Presbyterians, believe today.

Well, the way I see it, in an infinitely more entertaining and accessible way, Luke’s

story of Jesus and the ten lepers effectively highlights a number of Calvin's doctrines, especially regarding sin and salvation. With the help of Luke's story, perhaps we can gain yet another feel for the general principles of reformed thinking.

First, consider again the lepers themselves: despised outcasts - physically defiled and, because many in Jesus' day believed that illness and bad fortune were outward signs of inward evil, socially reviled. So besides being yucky to be around, Luke's lepers were also regarded as mega-sinners, the worst of God's forsaken ones.

Now one doctrine or belief for which Calvin is rather well known is the Doctrine of the "Total Depravity of Humanity." This rather distasteful but unavoidable doctrine of the Reformed tradition says, in effect, that before God all of us are lepers and mega-sinners. Regardless of how we may appear to ourselves or to one another, Calvin's doctrine of Total Depravity says that before God, each of us is a diseased and sinful creature, deserving to be cast from the embrace of God's grace.

Now none of us likes particularly to regard ourselves as sinners, never mind as totally depraved. In today's world of self-help books and personal empowerment seminars, we may find ourselves all the more reluctant to accept that the disheartening suggestion that no matter what we do, no matter how hard we try, no matter how sorry we are or how many good works we perform, we destitute sinners cannot finally achieve our own salvation. In a world in which we all struggle to maintain control, or at least to do the best we can, that's just not good news.

But remember that Calvin was a pretty astute observer of humankind. And one of the things he knew full well was that anyone who gazes honestly upon the stark face of his

or her own sin cannot help but experience deep humility, discouragement, even despair. But what Calvin also knew was that ours is not the final word on our existential standing. Becoming something of a tour guide through that valley of the shadow that most of us travel sooner or later, Calvin reminds his students that no matter how dark that valley, we do not travel it alone, nor is the way out of it a function of our personal map-making skills. God alone is the Way and the Truth and the Life, and God's help is ours for the asking.

Did you ever wonder why we Presbyterians always include a prayer of confession in our worship? The answer is so we can receive a word of forgiveness. We confess so we can be forgiven. But since there can be no forgiveness without repentance, through confession we name our sin boldly. Then, equally boldly, we look beyond it to God's sovereign grace. In penitence we speak the truth of our sin, but in faith and confidence in God's mercy and love, we anticipate God's acceptance, healing and restoration.

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" cry the dismal lepers. It's those who have hit bottom who know best the Source of mercy, hope, and salvation. Standing there at a distance, covered in shrouds, those lepers are indistinguishable to Jesus. He hasn't a clue whose faith is deepest, whose sores are worst, whose repentance is the most sincere, nor does he care where any of them are from. Jesus does not ask the lepers to come closer so he can distinguish their race, creed, gender or sexuality, nor does he inquire as to which leper has been remained kind in their suffering, or which have behaved like unrepentant jerks. Instead, simply on the strength of their appeal for mercy, Jesus offers it...freely and indiscriminately... to them all.

This illustrates another belief we Presbyterians share – the sovereignty not just of

God, but of God's grace - the idea that through Jesus Christ, redemption and salvation is offered to *all* humanity, indeed, to all creation. Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the saving event for all of God's creation. You and I are "saved" not through our beliefs, or our good works, or anything we do, or say, or are, or might become if we just try hard enough, but only through the freely given, unmerited, gracious gift of Jesus' life, offered by God to all creation.

Some months ago when I was hurrying up the front steps of my house after Christopher's soccer game, there, waiting on my porch, were two polite, attractive Jehovah's Witnesses wanting just a few minutes of my time to share the latest Watch Tower and their faith. I didn't want to be rude but I was in a major hurry. "Look," I said, "I believe, I'm saved and I'm on my way to a friend's funeral to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Okay? Now if you'll excuse me...."

But on reflection, I don't know, really, if I would have met their criteria for salvation. Especially since I often find, don't you, that when someone asks me if I've been saved, what they *really* want is for me to believe or say or do something that will evidence my "salvation" to *their* satisfaction. Well, we Presbyterians believe that is off the mark. We believe that through the unmerited grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, humanity, creation has *already* been "saved", cleansed, made whole; all of "us" and all of "them," without discrimination, just like the lepers in Luke's story,

Now, we can't really explain that. Not that we haven't tried. There's the temple cult's tradition of the substitution theory that says that Jesus' death was a substitutionary sacrifice for all our sins. Or the economic explanation, that Jesus' death paid humanity's

debt to God, a debt we can only incur but never repay ourselves. Or the judicial approach that places humanity on the block, and casts God as judge and Jesus as defending attorney, interceding on our behalf. Or there's a more current development of thought that sees Jesus' death as the inescapable destiny of a perfect life lived in an imperfect world. I figure whichever of those helps a body trust in God's sovereignty and grace is okay by me.

But what all that really boils down to for Presbyterians is that we don't worry much about salvation. God having pretty much taken care of salvation some two millennia ago, it's just not our chief concern. Just as salvation is not Luke's chief concern in his story about those ten happy, healed, saved lepers. The deed's been done; the question now is how the healed ones will respond.

Only one turns back to thank Jesus. "Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Therein lies the central concern of both Luke's story *and* Reformed Theology: not *who* gets saved, for everyone does, but how do we healed ones respond to God's unmerited grace?

In the Institutes Calvin dedicates chapter after chapter after chapter after chapter to how we ought to order our lives in response to God's grace. Luke, God bless him, says it a whole lot more simply: we are to respond God's grace with praise and thanksgiving. That's how I know the Samaritan is Presbyterian! Not because of where he stands on this issue or that, or where he's from, or even what he believes, but because of how he responds to the miracle of God's gracious salvation so freely offered through Christ Jesus.

Like that Samaritan leper, surely you and I know full well that we don't "merit" our salvation. But like him also, we sure are grateful to have it. We Presbyterians are not an anxious people overly concerned with our personal status before the Almighty. Rather, we are a confident and grateful people, eager to celebrate and give thanks for the astonishing gift of God's boundless grace. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, salvation was accomplished *once and for all*, and the faithful response of Presbyterians is gratitude, praise and obedience.

Folks, it's no great stretch of the imagination to look around, or within, to see that as individuals, as a church, as a society, as humankind, we remain, despite our best efforts, limited and sinful creatures. That's our confession. Yet through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are continually forgiven and restored. That's our assurance. Like lepers made whole, we keep getting up and going on our way, seeking to live lives that thank Jesus and glorify God. And that, friends, that is our Reformed faith.

To the glory of God. Amen