“More Than Healing”
Luke 17:11-17
A Sermon Delivered by
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In order to get a true grasp on our scripture passage for today- Luke 17- we need to consider that the issues associated with ethnic and religious heritage are nothing new. Jesus and his disciples were Galileans, so they were Jewish, but many Jews in Jerusalem considered Galileans to be second-class Jews in comparison with those in the capital city who were closer to the temple and to the priesthood. So the hierarchy according to the prejudice of that day was Jews from Jerusalem at the top, Galilean Jews second, then the Samaritans at a distant third. Most Jews, including those in Galilee, did not consider the Samaritans to be really Jewish at all. There had been too much intermarriage with the other populations there, and the Samaritans did not worship in Jerusalem, but rather at the ancient shrine in Shechem.

Remember the woman at the well who says to Jesus: "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (John 4:9) Obviously, there was great distrust between the two groups, and very significant religious differences.

Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan, where it is astonishing that a Samaritan, one of the despised people, is actually the one who acts as the neighbor to the Jew who fell among thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Today, we come to the story of the ten lepers. Now according to religious law, lepers were to wear torn garments, cover their mouths, and cry out, "Unclean," whenever they were in the vicinity of others. What the account does not tell us at first is that the group of lepers is a mixed group. There are Jews and at least one Samaritan. Since lepers are outcasts in the Jewish community, and probably in the Samaritan community as well, they might as well form a single community of outcasts! As long as they are all lepers, what does it matter?

The lepers, in their great physical and emotional pain, cry out to Jesus. He hears them, he directs them to go to the priests, and on their way, he heals them, but the Samaritan comes back, thankful for his healing.

On the surface, this story seems simple and straightforward, pointing to the virtue of gratitude. It's almost as though scripture were a parent speaking to children, urging them to say “thank you” when someone has done something nice for them. Even Jesus appreciates a “thank you.” But when we dig a little deeper, we see that its meaning is far more complex than a simple thank you.

What seems to matter to Jesus is not so much the thanking as the glorifying of God. The text says that the Samaritan was doing that with a loud voice, even before he thanked Jesus. And Jesus' concern about the other nine is not that they did not thank him, but that they did not give glory to God. The nine who keep on going are probably very grateful that they have been healed, but apparently their healing has taught them nothing about who Jesus is. The Samaritan recognized that somehow, in this Galilean preacher and healer, God is acting in a new and unique way.

Remember Jesus directed them to go see the priests and before they caught up with the priests, they were cleansed. The Samaritan felt compelled to go back because he recognized who was responsible for his healing. He went beyond obedience and displayed a sincere, joyful, reverent gratitude that characterized a fully-formed mature faith. His experience of grace led to the praising of God.

Jesus wonders out loud why it is that only the Samaritan, the foreigner, understood. That is a good question for us to ponder as well. Were the Jews so familiar with the ways of God, so knowledgeable about what was to be done, that they failed to recognize this new action? If so, we face the same danger, because we also know and study the ways of God. Maybe there is a religious familiarity that makes it difficult to be astonished. Maybe that's why Jesus says that prostitutes and tax collectors would
enter the kingdom before the religious people of the day. The people who assumed they were outcasts from the God of Israel—the crippled, the lepers, the Samaritans—were more ready to be astonished by God's love and mercy.

But maybe the most surprising and clarifying statement in this passage is the very last verse. After Jesus comments on the absence of the nine, he then speaks to the Samaritan: “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you [whole]” (Luke 17:19b RSV).

The man was already healed. What does it mean that his faith has made him whole? Well, let’s take a look at the meaning of the words. When referring to the leprosy, the words used are “cleansed” or “healed.” But the Samaritan's faith has made him whole; these words can also be translated, “his faith has saved him.” For ten, the leprosy was cured; they were healed. But the one who returned, the one who realized, however vaguely, who Jesus was—his faith in this one in whom he glimpsed God—his faith, not his gratitude—saved him.

A truly whole person has a faith characterized by joy—not happiness based on circumstance, reverence, and praise as well as obedience. Fully-formed faith brings a new freedom that gives one a relationship to God that goes beyond the dynamics of commandment-and-obedience.

If you really want to gain insight into scripture, take a look at the passages that come directly before or after the passage you are studying. In this case, the passage that immediately follows describes the kingdom of God. People will ask about when to expect the kingdom, only to be told it is in their midst. The Samaritan leper recognized the emerging kingdom in Jesus, and everything else was secondary, even his own leprosy. His faith, obvious in his actions, made him whole. The other nine ceased to be lepers. Most likely, they continued on their way to Jerusalem. They were examined by the priests and certified as healthy. They could now be full members of society. Life could go on. I’m sure they were grateful to God and grateful to Jesus. They had their old lives back. But they had missed the kingdom of God that had been in their midst in the person of Jesus. Their lives were healed, but old. The Samaritan had also been healed. But what he had was a new life, not a new lease on an old life.

This passage is not about gratitude. It is about the nearness of the kingdom and the readiness to enter it. It is about being so caught up in our old lives that we fail to recognize the possibility of a new one. It is about the work of God in Jesus, who is not simply fixing up old lives, but offering new ones. It is about a wholeness, a salvation, that is far beyond healing—a wholeness, a salvation for the whole creation gone awry. And it is about the advantages that outsiders sometimes have in recognizing the presence of the kingdom.

Sometimes our hopes for healing are so limited that we miss all that God is offering to us in Christ. Maybe those on the margins of society, those who are outcast, because their whole lives cry out for healing and wholeness—maybe they are more open to the fullness of God's salvation.

Jesus came to show us a better way to live life. Even in the awful situations we sometimes find ourselves, Jesus is able to reach us and to save us. Our families can’t save us, our friends can't save us, our boyfriends, our girlfriends, our husbands, our wives cannot save us. Only Jesus can save us.

We are all broken in some way. Most of us recognize it and try to fix ourselves. Some of you are carrying deep wounds and scars. Maybe you were abused, neglected or abandoned. Maybe you are searching for your self-worth in your role as a mid, as a mother, as a "fill in the blank."

Maybe you are looking for validation of your manhood by viewing pornography. Let’s talk about that elephant in the room. That crazy cycle. Getting your fix. Sure, it feels good at the time, but then you feel guilty or maybe overwhelmed and you find yourself needing another fix to dull the pain or fill the emptiness because deep down, you know this is not the answer to your soul’s deepest longing. Ladies, I know we are tempted to determine our self-worth through our relationships. If things are going well, then we are loveable and beautiful. If not, well then we're not worthy.

Our spiritual enemy desperately wants all of us to believe that this Jesus stuff is all fluff and doesn't hold any power. That you can save yourself, fix yourself or complete yourself through something or someone.
When we try to do that, we end up broken, unsatisfied and frustrated in our relationships with one another. But when we look toward God for our wholeness and healing, then and only then will we find that for which we've been searching.

Let me clarify – there are times, especially in cases of addiction, when we need more help than just trying to get connected with God. Maybe we need to talk with a counselor, a trusted friend, a chaplain who can help us. But do not underestimate the spiritual component of your struggle.

When we stand far away from him, Jesus does not stand far away from us. When the Lepers could not get to him, he got to them. When they could not come to him, he came to them, and we come to understand he will come to us, as well.

Let us pray: Almighty God, in whose image we are created, open our eyes and hearts to the wonder of your name; prepare us to be astonished by your work in our lives. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.