



“Where are We?”

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Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)**

“The Healing of the Ten Lepers” is a fascinating story for people of faith who identify as “seekers,” as people unwilling to check our brains at the door when we come to church. On a literary level, seekers may notice that today’s gospel reading raises a lot of interesting questions such as these:

1. Why is “The Healing of the Ten Lepers” only found in Luke, when most of Jesus’ parables and healing stories appear in two or more of the gospels? *Did somebody’s dog eat Mathew, Mark, and John’s homework?*
2. How can it be that this healing takes place on the border of Samaria and Galilee, 100 miles north of Jerusalem, when the stories that precede it took place in Jerusalem? *Did Luke fail orienteering?*
3. Why does Luke present as problematic the fact that only one leper returned to thank Jesus, when Jesus commanded all ten to go and show themselves to the priests? *Weren’t the other nine just following orders?*
4. Why did Jesus say to the Samaritan, “Your faith has made you well,” when a person’s faithfulness was rarely associated with Jesus’ healing ministry? *Did some revisionist history freak get hold of this story before it hit the press?*

II

The answers to these and other intriguing seeker questions come into focus when we discover that today’s reading is actually two stories compressed into one,¹ and that this compressed version functions as more of an *allegory* that describes the nature and purpose of Jesus’ healing ministry, than providing a kind of first-century *instant-replay* of a miracle account.

¹ Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, and Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1994), 437.

The first of the two compressed stories featured in today's reading is found in vv. 11-14, which describes the healing of the ten lepers.

Lepers, as you may know, were considered outcasts in virtually every culture where the disease manifested, even in modern times. Morally speaking, many cultures (including Jesus' own) believed that leprosy was a form of divine judgment on its victims who were presumed to be unrepentant sinners.

Practically speaking, there was no cure for leprosy (i.e., "Hansen's disease") until the advent of antibiotics. As you may know, even though we have these medicines today, the disease continues to flourish in impoverished nations, where only the wealthy can access prescription medications. According to the Center of Disease Control in Atlanta, 90% of all current leprosy cases are found today in Brazil, Madagascar, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Nepal. So, in theory, this disease, which is thought to be communicated in respiratory droplets² (much like tuberculosis), can be completely cured today.

For religious and public health reasons, lepers were historically segregated from the larger societies in which they have lived. In Ancient Israel, lepers were banished from their homes and communities, from the Temple and religious life, and from direct contact with anyone who was not stricken with the disease or otherwise considered an outcast.³

Lepers congregated in colonies as a survival strategy, and begged for food and alms near the intersections of major roads and at the outskirts of the cities where they lived.⁴

Fred Craddock and Eugene Boring describe leprosy as "a kind of living death"⁵ in *The People's New Testament Commentary*. The memoirs of Father Damien, the 19th century Belgian missionary who served among the lepers on Molokai, Hawaii, demonstrates that not much had improved in the lives, or in the treatment, of lepers from biblical times until the mid 20th century.⁶

Understanding the gravity and multifaceted nature of the disease (physically, spiritually, and socially), we can only imagine the relief that healing implied on so many levels for the ten lepers described in Luke 17.

III

The healing of the ten is the first part of this two-part compacted story. The second part is the story of the Samaritan's salvation, in vv. 15-19.

² http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/hansens_t.htm

³ Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, and Tucker, 437.

⁴ Craddock, *Luke* in the Interpretation for Teaching and Preaching Series, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 202-204.

⁵ Craddock and Boring, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2004), 247.

⁶ For more on Fr. Damien: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_Damien

Here the Samaritan returns to thank Jesus for his healing, and Jesus replies by saying to the foreigner—the outcast among outcasts—“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

The effect of these two stories—the healing of the ten, and the salvation of the foreigner—compressed into one, had what you might call a “double espresso” effect of Jesus’ audience in that it jolted them into full awareness of God’s healing power, and God’s deep desire to heal prejudice.

By healing the ten and by affirming the foreigner, Luke demonstrated Jesus’ healing power. Luke also demonstrated Jesus’ belief that the most rejected could be a model of faithfulness. And Luke offered a model of Christian community that was formed out of a profound sense of shared needs, such as the community of lepers that had overcome the profound prejudice that Jews and Samaritans were known to harbor against each other.

Do you hear how powerful this message was? Can you feel the double-espresso effect of this two-in-one story?

Imagine if we could operationalize this model in our time! Imagine if modern individuals and groups who experienced disease or other hardships could see that their own—our own—wellbeing was caught up in the wellbeing of others and threw our lots in together.

Imagine if residents of Ashland and El Portal would embrace the idea that regardless of which side of the freeway we live on, the wellbeing of our individual neighborhoods is bound up in the wellbeing of the wider community and county.

Imagine if gang members from the north and south would embrace the idea that their own wellbeing was bound up in the wellbeing of their arch rival, and the wellbeing of all the young people in our community, regardless of what identity group they affiliated with.

Imagine if fundamentalist and progressive Christians alike would come together and support equal marriage and employment rights in our state, nation, and world, as a testament to the truth that equal rights for all does not diminish the rights of any, and that equal rights for all fosters health and healing of every person and all of our families, regardless of gender or family form.

Imagine what progress, what healing, might result from any of these unlikely groups, or others, throwing their lots together the way that the ten lepers did in Luke 19.

IV

To reach an even deeper level of understanding of this story, take a moment and sense where you find yourself in today's gospel passage. Consider what characters or aspects of this story you/we resonate with.

If we can sense these synergies between our life experience and the gospel narrative, then we can more clearly sense the wisdom that this passage offers us today, embrace that wisdom, and take a positive step on the healing path.

Listen again to the text, and ask yourself the question, "Where am I, where are we, in this story?"

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God, except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then Jesus said to the foreigner, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

What's your response? Where are you, where are we, in this story?

1. Are we part of Jesus' *inner circle* listening to the story, or the *outsiders* seeking mercy?
2. Are we the persons *in need* of healing, or *the healer* responding to the needs of others?
3. Are we the one who returns *unexpectedly* to say thank you, or the ones who just do what's *expected* and move on?
4. Are we the one who received the *thanks*, or one who waits for an *acknowledgment*?
5. Are we like the *ten* who found allies among seemingly unlikely companions, or like the *masses* who persist in upholding the prejudices of the larger culture?

Where are we in the text? With whom do we identify?

How we answer these questions will vary, because our life experiences vary, and because—despite what some of us have been taught in the past—Jesus’ moral lessons didn’t come in a one-size-fits-all version.

Some examples follow to help us dive more deeply into the biblical text, and the text of our lives.

If you find any of these questions particularly compelling, consider making them the focus of your meditation or journaling this week. If you don’t have a particular prayer practice that feels helpful to you right now, probe the most salient question that this passage raises for you with someone dear to you, or contact Brenda or me for further conversation.

In the meantime, here are some ways that we may find ourselves in this text:

Inner Circle

- If we experience ourselves as part of Jesus’ *inner circle*, as people who have generally benefited from his ministry, this passage may prompt the question to us that Luke posed to Jesus’ disciples: “Have we become so familiar with privilege that our sense of gratitude has devolved to a sense of entitlement?” If so, perhaps this could be the day that we reaffirm our blessings, and cultivate a more intentional attitude of gratitude.

Outer Circle

- If we identify with the *lepers*—with the outsiders—with people estranged from families, friends, and society because of some malady—can we dare to believe that God’s healing is meant for us?
- If our social location is as “the identified patient” in our families and communities, dare we claim our power to be agents in our own healing process?
- If we are among the ten, can we bandy together with others who have been excluded to form mutual support systems, and help foster our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others?
- And, if we are persons who have been healed, are we living our lives as an act of gratitude, like the Samaritan who returned to say thank you, or are we just moving on with our lives, trying to forget rather than integrate the difficulties of our past experiences into our personal stories, and thereby miss the opportunity to understand and testify to the healing that Christ has done in our lives?

Healers

- Alternatively, if we find ourselves in the role of *healer* in the lives of others, do we dare acknowledge our own need for healing?
- And, if we have helped others find healing, are we able to receive their gratitude in a manner that fosters their wellbeing and our own, or are we somehow ensnared in a need-to-be-needed role, so that we continue to cultivate others' dependence upon us, and none of us is ultimately whole?

Where are we in the text? With whom do we most identify? Perhaps there's one role that seems to fit us, or perhaps we identify with more than one role. Our answer likely depends on our life circumstances. Regardless of the role(s) we identify with, all of us follow the Samaritan's example, all of us experience Christ's healing, and all of us live out the testimony that our faith has made us well, as we strive to identify and answer the question, "Where are we in this text?" Thanks be to God. Amen.