

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

It turns out that leprosy is not especially contagious, and can be effectively treated with antibiotics. There are still some two-hundred thousand new cases each year globally, mostly in India and Africa, but that number is a dramatic reduction from even 30 years ago. Nonetheless, those who contract the infection are especially visible because of the skin lesions which often present themselves, and the damage to limbs and fingers. That by the way, often happens because the bacteria cause nerve damage which makes parts of the body numb, and so wounds often go unnoticed and untreated. In the ancient, and not-so-ancient world, leprosy was a frightening condition, one to be avoided at all costs, one which was not only a social stigma, but a really good reason to separate and quarantine its victims. It was thought that contact with such afflicted persons was a veritable death-warrant, which, in a world without antibiotics, may have been a prudent worry.

Now, these ten lepers display their faith. They witness to their faith in God. As the crowd following Jesus, standing at an appropriate distance from the afflicted ones, are listening, these ten call out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" They have recognized the spark of divinity in Jesus' presence, and are witnessing to it. They are, in a way, making a prayer, a very public prayer, for God to be present with them. And they are made clean. This may be mysterious, marvelous, and miraculous, but it's not magic. Notice that Jesus doesn't say some incantation over them, but rather gives them a homework assignment to go and show themselves to the priests. Jesus is not a magician, and those who observed this event were meant to understand that. Notice, too, that unlike any magician you've ever heard of, Jesus does not take credit for the miracle. He doesn't claim to have performed a "trick" by some skill of his own. He doesn't bow for applause. He doesn't pass the hat afterward. He just calls attention to the wonder of it all. By making that prayer, Master have mercy on us, the ten lepers expressed their desire to be in relationship with God. They demonstrated their wish for increased faith. Being in relationship with God is not difficult; certainly it is God's great dream. But publically witnessing to faith in God, like these ten, often seems hard,

Almost every week we ask God's blessing on one or more of the quilts made by our devoted team of quilters. And we tie prayer knots in them to signify our intentions. These quilts, together with our prayers are then given to someone who needs to feel God's presence. But what we do is not magic. The words of the prayer I wrote to be used for the occasion are not an incantation. Nor is the tying of prayer knots some magical ritual. We are not somehow conjuring up God's Spirit to inhabit this piece of fabric. We are asking God's blessing on it because we want it to be a witness to God's abiding and healing love. Just like we do when we ask God's blessing on the bread and wine for Holy Communion, or on the water we use for baptism. We are praying faithfully that God's presence may be remembered, recognized, appreciated, in and through their use. Remember, I have explained how in our Anglican tradition, in our Anglican sensibility, that no matter what we say or do, nothing is really blessed until it is used in service of God's dream. We dedicate these prayer quilts with the faith, the abiding and awesome faith, that they can remind those who receive them of God's love, and that God will use them as a tool in the great, and complicated, work of healing. And the email prayer requests with which I bombard you weekly, ask for prayers, not for magic, but for the miracle of God's presence, that those who are ill or in trouble may be nurtured by God's healing presence.

So, the assignment that Jesus gives the ten former lepers, to present themselves to the religious leaders (in a sense, to the Church), has multiple reasons, I think: First, that the witness to the awesome power and love of God can continue. That the witness may be used as an evangelical tool to convince others that God makes us, loves us, and keeps us. So, the blessing of this healing is then being used in

God's service, and therefore earns the status of becoming a true blessing indeed. Second, Jesus might just be reminding the religious leaders, the Church if you will, that it is not their liturgy or traditions which have achieved this remarkable healing miracle, but rather faith in God, independent from their incantations and rituals. And thirdly, the restored lepers, by their witness to the priests, might remind those who wear even the fanciest and most elaborate robes that they aren't magicians, either, but that their responsibility, the church's responsibility, is to encourage and nurture lives of faith. Perhaps it is the church's primary task to lead the people in asking the question "What's the faithful thing to do now?" Here, standing right in front of them, right in front of us, is a true testimony to the power of God's love and mercy, God's intentions, when aligned sacramentally with the human intentions of faithfulness. And that testimony is meant to be very convincing.

But there is another twist in our Gospel lesson this morning: The leper who is most faithful, most aware of God's presence, is a Samaritan! So, what is a Samaritan? Do you want the long historical version, or the short useful version? Let's just say that Samaritans, for several centuries, were looked down upon by the religious and social leaders of Jerusalem. When the great kingdom of David and his son Solomon, which is probably an exaggeration BTW, eventually broke apart, the southern region around Jerusalem became more prosperous than the north and became obsessed with the cult of the Jerusalem temple, while the north thought that was just elitist presumption, and went their own way devoted, as always, to the teachings of the Torah. Then the north was invaded, conquered, and settled by a lot of Mesopotamians who brought with them their culture and religion, and the divide between north and south, the rivalry and disagreement, became even wider.

Now, Galilee, where Jesus lived and taught, was part of that northern region called Samaria, but some 100 years or so before his birth Galilee had regionally re-converted to Judaism. Even so, we can tell by the Gospel stories that Jesus was disrespected by the Jerusalem cult, probably as much for his heritage as for his teachings. But at least he wasn't a Samaritan! Jerusalem still considered those half-breeds to be immoral and untrustworthy, truly lesser human beings. So this one leper, the one who, after realizing he was healed, turns back and says "thanks", has two strikes against him. He is an outcast for two reasons, illness and social status. And yet, he is the one whom Jesus identifies with, and the one who is singled-out by the author Luke as being the most faithful. Luke has told us another story about a Samaritan; do you remember what it is? Luke is the only one of the four Gospel writers who recalls Jesus' parable of the "Good Samaritan", "good" being, in that culture, an unusual adjective to use with Samaritans. In that story, a Samaritan shows love and concern for his fellow man, his "neighbor". Now in today's narrative, Luke tells of a Samaritan who is publically thankful and faithful. The Samaritan leper, returns to praise God and thank God with a loud voice! Imagine, a Samaritan!

What is the faithful thing to do? It is my humble advice to be continually thankful for all the mysteriously marvelous miracles which adorn our lives, no matter who you are or how you yourself might be afflicted. Being thankful unleashes the awesome power of faith. Begin and end each prayer with thanksgiving. Begin and end each day with thanksgiving. Make both private and public testimonies of thanksgiving. Give thanks with hearts and hands and voices. Let your thankfulness be in your voice when you recite the Nicene Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and even the Confession of Sins. Notice God's continual restoration and healing in your life, and then turn back and give thanks. It *is* the faithful thing to do, and will probably lead you along to asking other important questions. Meanwhile, testify to the truth that Jesus, while being no magician, has demonstrated that faith is the antibiotic to spiritual disease. Faith is powerful medicine. May we all hear the voice of Jesus say, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.", and may we all have the opportunity to say it to one another. Amen