



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Process of Healing

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 9, 2016
The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Based on Luke 17:11-19*

An intriguing thing happened on the way to Jerusalem! The scene is a little dusty, nondescript Samaritan village. No different from dozens of other crossroads through which Jesus passed on his journey from the Galilee region to Jerusalem. Not a remarkable place in any respect save one—and that's the fact that all the world over this morning people are hearing about it from pulpits and lecterns. The village itself is probably buried under the dust of the centuries, but it lives because Christ lives, and his people recollect in today's Gospel reading what he did there one day.

Luke alone of the four gospel accounts has preserved this for us, and that's not surprising when we recall that in addition to being a spokesperson, Luke was also a physician—indeed, a beloved physician, and therefore exhibited a peculiar interest in sickness and in the restoration of health and wholeness.

Luke tells us about ten desperate people—they were lepers. They had the most dreaded disease of the ancient world. Painful, disfiguring, disgusting, and frequently fatal ... a disease that made them outcasts from all non-lepers. They had to wear bells around their necks and shout "unclean, unclean" so that others would know they were around and could get away from them.

Luke tells us about their meeting with Jesus, about the fact that although all ten were cleansed of their leprosy, sadly enough only one was totally healed ... only one was made whole.

Now, none of us has leprosy, but few if any of us are not in dire need of healing and wholeness in some aspect of our lives. In fact, I don't know anyone who is completely whole, totally well. All of us are searching for some type of healing and redemption:

- ... From the cancer patient who is desperate for a cure,
- ... To the anxiety-ridden business executive in search of abiding peace;
- ... From the rejected teenager in search of companionship,
- ... To the angry spouse in search of joy and harmony.

Whatever it is, all of us have dis-ease!

Thus, this gospel text is tailor-made for our own search for healing and wholeness. I'd like to invite you to look with me at the story and see what we might learn from it about the process of healing and wholeness.

The first thing that leaps out in the story is that the 10 lepers stood afar off...

They kept their distance.

Isn't that how much of our world deals with dis-ease? ... We see those with disorders, with illness, with dysfunction as unapproachable ... we want them to keep their distance. And thus, many people see God in this way—as distant —just a vague concept or mystical unknowing...

Many people look at their disease, at their uncleanness, at their lack of perfection and assume that God and others must be disgusted and repulsed ... But in God's bountiful mercy, nothing could be further from the truth.

Again and again, the Gospels record the sensitivity of Jesus to others' pain, to illness, to brokenness, to loneliness. It is precisely to those conditions of human need that he was most receptive ... and if we're following his lead, we are to assume those same responses.

In today's Gospel text, we have a vivid demonstration of ten lepers who are compelled by Jesus' manner to call out to him. Healing begins with our approaching God and others with our needs.

Notice, then, the second stage in the process of healing and wholeness: They called out for mercy. Notice —

- They didn't explain their illness;
- They didn't try to justify themselves;
- They didn't make excuses for their condition;
- They didn't apologize for being unclean.

Their plea was from the depths of their being: "Jesus, master, have mercy on us!" It's the prayer of prayers—the universal cry for help ... the timeless plea of humanity.

This prayer is echoed in the Eucharistic liturgy rite:

"Lord have mercy upon us;
Christ have mercy upon us;
Lord have mercy upon us."

Healing involves asking God to enter into our illness, brokenness and pain.

There's a third step in the lepers' healing—the need for action. Jesus responds to their plea, and then says that there's something they needed to do, there's an action they needed to take... "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

This is a reference to the tradition that stated that the Aaronic Priesthood had to determine if one had been healed of leprosy and to certify cleanliness. It was within this context that Jesus directed them to go and show themselves to the priests. Thus, they were agents, surrogates of the healing process.

We have to do likewise. We have many wonderful human agents, vehicles and resources that God makes available for our healing. "Go and show yourselves to the priests" might mean —

- Go to an alcoholic treatment center;
- Go to a therapist or spiritual director for counsel;
- Go to your spouse and ask for forgiveness;
- Go to your parents for comfort and guidance and direction;
- Go to your priest for confession;
- Go to your physician for treatment;
- Go to your enemy for reconciliation.

Healing involves some action. It requires us to take responsibility for our wellness and for healing. We're told that "as the lepers went, they were cleansed."

Then Luke describes the last phase in healing and wholeness. "Ten were cleansed," he said, "but only one was healed." Ten got over their leprosy, but only one was made whole. Why? Because only one turned back, "praising God with a loud voice, and falling on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks." That's the final act of healing and wholeness: deep and abiding gratitude.

I love the story told by Garrison Keillor about Clarence Bunson, the Midwestern Lutheran businessman.

One Sunday morning while taking a shower, Clarence Bunson thought he was having a heart attack. But he remembered a Reader's Digest article that described the pain of a heart attack to be akin to an elephant stepping on your chest, and his felt more like a large dog had stepped on his and then got off quickly. So, he decided that his trauma was something else.

As he gathered himself and completed getting dressed, he thought to himself while going downstairs for breakfast, "You know, this could be a real wake-up call about life and health."

When he arrived in the kitchen, his wife asked him, "How are you?" Clarence thought to himself: "How do you explain to your spouse that you might have just had a heart attack, but didn't? So I thought, "I'm Norwegian," so I just said, 'Well, I'm fine, thank you, how are you?'"

During breakfast, he thought, "It's Sunday, I'm going to church ... I wasn't going to attend, but now, after my scare, I'm feeling grateful so I'll go." So he quickly made it to worship. During the offertory, Clarence began to feel so full of thanksgiving he decided to write a check for his offering ... and so he wrote out the name of the church, and wrote \$30 in the amount, and put it in the plate. But during the singing of the Doxology he began to be worried that he had added an extra zero in the amount section, making the check out for \$300 instead of \$30. He wondered if it would be ok to go downstairs during communion and find the people counting the money and say, "There's been a terrible mistake." But he decided not to do that ... he just went forward and received communion. He realized that he gave more than he really wanted (and here's the best line of the whole story) and he felt more alive than he had for months. He wrote a check for \$300 in gratitude, and it made him come alive.

Jesus said to the cleansed leper ... "rise and go your way."

To see God as the source of healing and wholeness, to approach God with our needs, to cry out for mercy, to take action for our healing, and to thank God ... to do those things is to be on our way to healing and wholeness.

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