

“Clean and Well”

At my previous congregation, some things were said by a visiting Pastor that may have better been left unsaid, or could have been said better. Some people were bothered by what seemed to be an attack of their faith: an accusation for not having faith; or, not having enough faith; or not having the right kind of faith. My assessment was, if they had been bothered by that, they may have been right.

First, please note that I used the word “bothered.” I have most studiously avoided the term “offended.” “Offense” is a technical term in theology; it defines a statement or action that is designed to destroy, or at the very least make another call into question their own, faith — “Designed,” that is, intended.

Giving offense is a gravely serious charge. You go to a comedy club and the featured act uses the “F” word repeatedly. You don’t like; it offends your ears. That is not what theologians mean by offense. Theologians will further make the distinction between “giving offense” and “taking offense.” I may say something that you don’t like to hear, but I did not intend to disrupt your faith; I was not giving offense. You may hear something he said, but if you extend that beyond his intent, if you get all bent out of shape and begin to hold this against that speaker, you are taking offense. Giving and taking offense are both serious breaches of Christian community.

[An aside: When I was a pastor in New York, there was a nearby pastor who, at just about every pastor’s conference, would stand up, peel off his glasses, and say to the main speaker, “Now, I’m no theologian . . .” And I wanted to scream, “The sit down, ya quack!” Every Pastor has to be a theologian. I am a theologian. So I take this offense business very seriously.]

Okay, so some people heard some things said that they thought challenged their faith. I wouldn’t be happy about what was delivered had

I heard it as they did. Indeed, I told Kristine that I heard from many that they felt they had been through an indictment (that's indictment, not a inquisition!). I do not believe that visitor intended to offend. Just the opposite; I think he wanted to encourage, maybe even inspire.

We Lutheran theologians would have to say that he confused Law and Gospel. That Law is a tricky old bird; it has to be handled very carefully. I surmised that those who were bothered, upset, piqued, perturbed, angry, or disgruntled [aside: have you ever met anyone who's "gruntled"?], heard Law (accusation) where they would have expected to hear Gospel (affirmation). It bothered them. It should have.

Today's Gospel present us with the narrative concerning ten lepers. It is not just a story about healing; it is, at heart, a story about faith. I think it can help us slog our way through this issue of faith, faithfulness, or lack thereof, that is always before every congregation. As we move through this narrative, I ask you to keep in mind the admonition of St. Paul to Timothy we heard in today's Second Lesson:

***If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he will also deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.***

The narrative begins with ten lepers. When you run into numbers like "3," "7," "10" and a few others in the Bible, you're always made to take notice, because often these numbers take on symbolic meaning. In Jewish numerology, 3, 7, and 10 take on mystic status, take on meaning as perfection, completeness, wholeness. So that there are ten lepers here makes me ask, "*Is there some significance to that number?*" My answer is an emphatic, "*Sort of...maybe.*" It is by no means clear that Luke didn't just pick a number, or that there just happened to be exactly ten lepers who show up . . . but it is also possible that these ten represent the whole of humanity that finds itself sick, outcast, and isolated.

These ten lepers are together — that, to me, is important. Even those who

have been pushed aside by society, or religious rules and customs, need and find community. It is the essence of the human creature to seek out others with whom to connect. To be sure, some of us (we're called introverts) may prefer isolation; but we also know that we need community. Some of you (known as extroverts) need community so much that you may neglect to give yourselves sufficient space and time to be alone. So these ten have found each other.

Jesus comes into the picture. Luke gives us no indication that these ten have any knowledge about Jesus, including about His ability to heal. We haven't encountered a healing miracle since Chapter 14. So what induces them to cry out, "***Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!***"? We cannot say from the text; but we can surmise that word about Jesus had begun to filter out to various towns and villages, and when these men saw the entourage that surrounded Jesus wherever He went, they went for it.

Luke does tell us that their exchange happened at a distance. This was in keeping with the ceremonial law concerning lepers; they were to avoid human contact and thus were required to maintain a certain distance. Luke merely states that they were "keeping their distance," so we cannot be more precise how closely in they came. Presumably, they were close enough for Jesus to both see and hear them, and recognize that they were, in fact, lepers.

So Jesus tells them, "***Go and show yourselves to the priests.***" I'm going to let that sink in just a bit . . . Leviticus 13 required that anyone with a leprous disease (there were more than one, including evidence of mold, mildew, as well as what today is called "Hansen's disease") must appear before a priest for it to be determined that the leprosy had disappeared. This is what Jesus was telling them to do; but He hadn't done or said anything that would remotely hint that He had in that moment performed anything like a healing!

They go! They do not question; they do not protest; they do not hesitate. They go! That's faith! They were trusting that their petition would be heard, but it had been a somewhat vague petition: "***Jesus, Master, have***

mercy on us!” What does that request mean? “*Give us some money.*”? “*How about some food.*”? “*Be nice to us. Don’t kick us around like some other do*”? When Kristine and I were in Chicago some time back on vacation, walking back to the train station from a museum we encountered a man sitting in a doorway and this was his spiel, “*Would somebody give me a dollar so I can go get drunk?*” I found that refreshingly honest.

These ten had asked for nothing more than mercy, they are given less than uplifting instructions, they act on them, and lo and behold “***as they went, they were made clean.***” They hadn’t yet seen the outcome of their request, nor the consequence of their obedience, but they went . . . they went in faith. Only then did they see that they were clean.

I have heard and read any number of sermons that absolutely excoriate these lepers. But these are men in desperate circumstances, who seek God’s help, and respond in faith. We could find far less admirable models. We do in fact find the more admirable model . . . the one leper who turned back. Before we take a closer look at what this man did, I want to make sure that I emphasize that the other nine were not somehow defective.

These are persons of faith. So what makes the other, the one who turned back, different? Did he have more, better, deeper, stronger faith? We are inclined to think so. Which would make the others defective in the faith department, and I don’t think that’s the case. I think we can safely say three things about this man: 1) He was more aware. 2) He was more thankful. 3) He was more worshipful. Those are not measures of faith; they are the results of faith . . . they are what comes after faith has begun its work in a person.

He was more aware . . . The others must have realized that cleansing had happened to them; it would hard to miss a change in the symptoms of leprosy. So they must have been aware enough to know that there was real hope for them as they hasten on to see the priest. One could argue, in fact, that they were simply following Jesus’ command; they were

going to show themselves to the priest.

This one, however, seems to be aware that, not only have his circumstances changed, and very much to the good, but there was a source for this good fortune. He was aware that Jesus had made something happen. He may not have known how or why or even what, but he was aware whence his healing came.

That awareness led him to thankfulness. We all know that, when you tell a child who has been given a gift or who has had something nice done for them, and you the parent say, “*What do you say?*” the reply is almost always, “*Thank you.*” You cannot make a child thankful; although we still think it’s important that they observe manners — you cannot make an adult thankful either. Every time you tell someone to be thankful, what you get is a sham. Thankfulness comes from within.

This man is thankful. The nine, I’m sure, were grateful. There is a difference. Gratefulness is the relief that comes when the bad thing is removed from the equation. Thankfulness is when the giver is acknowledged and treated with honor. Look what this man does: “***he turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.***” This is no prompted courtesy “*Thank you.*” This is deep, profound thanksgiving.

It is thanksgiving expressed in worship. “***Praising God with a loud voice,***” he comes. I have to admit that sometimes in our worship we could use a louder voice of praise. There’s only one of me, but often I’m the only one I can hear. This man then prostrated himself (good translation) — the action of a man who knows himself to be in the presence of either royalty or the divine (or we may argue, in this case, both!) I am not suggesting that we rearrange the furniture so that we can all lay ourselves prostrate on the ground as we worship. I am suggesting that our worship life could be more robust, and for some of our members, more regular.

All of which is not faith itself, but the consequences, the products of faith.

Note how Jesus speaks to this man: ***“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”*** Each of the lepers was made clean; that is, their immediate need was met. They were cured. This man was healed. Beyond his status as leper, he is also identified as a Samaritan. We was the outcast’s outcast. Yet this one came into a profound relationship with Christ, and more than his illness was altered. Another way to translated Jesus’ words to him is: *“your faith has saved (or rescued) you.”*

I need to emphasize that Jesus did not say that his behaviors — his praising, his turning back, his falling at Jesus’ feet — none of that saved him. It was his faith. And he was well.

Right now, I feel I can safely assume that every person in this room has something for which they need some cleansing — some burden, some ache or pain, some wound from the past, some worry or concern — and we need boldly to cry out in prayer, *“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”* But we should also long to go deeper, to find in Christ not just some solutions, but the vitality, the strength, the power, the joy, and the hope that we need.

We long for cleansing; we must also long to be well. And when we give ourselves over to Jesus, we will find the wholeness we so desperately need.

Amen.