

### Proper 23 – C

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went they were cleansed.”

There was a man who boarded a train in New York City. Immediately he went to the porter and said, “Look, I want to get off in Washington D.C., but once I’m asleep it’s very difficult for me to wake up. Sometimes I say nasty things I don’t really mean. Here is five dollars. Please, no matter what I say, don’t be offended; just wake me up and put me off the train in Washington.” Hours later, he awakened as the train pulled into the station in Richmond, Virginia, 100 miles past Washington. The man was furious. He found the porter and angrily denounced him for his incompetence. After he walked away, boiling mad, the conductor asked the porter, “What happened? I’ve never seen any one that mad!” To which the porter replied, “That’s nothing. You should have seen the guy I put off in Washington.”

Traveling can be quite an adventure. Some adventures are more pleasant than others. In our gospel reading, Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem. This passage does not mention it, but the disciples and a large crowd are following him. And Jesus sends a group of lepers on a journey, but not all of them take the same route. We all do a lot of traveling in our lives. And even when we stay home, we still do some traveling, spiritual traveling. I am not talking about some new age nonsense, but simply the fact that life is a journey. We are all growing and learning no matter if we go far away or just stay home. Life is a journey.

Jesus’ journey takes him into no man’s land. Luke tells us he is passing between Samaria and Galilee. Galilee is the mostly Jewish area in the northern part of what was once and is now Israel. It is centered around the Sea of Galilee which is actually a lake. The main Jewish area is Judah to the south which includes Jerusalem and the temple. In between these Jewish areas is Samaria where the Samaritans lived.

Jesus and his followers are somewhere near the border between Galilee and Samaria headed south toward Jerusalem. From what Jesus says about only the foreigner returning, it seems that nine of the lepers were Jews. So Jesus is probably just north of the border and still technically in Galilee or perhaps in a Jewish village within the border of Samaria. In either case, this would have been no man’s land.

What would life have been like in such a village? It would not be a place where the so-called religious people would have lived or even visited. Chances are a Pharisee would never set foot in such a place because there was too much of a chance that he might have encountered a Samaritan. And whatever the Samaritan equivalent of a Pharisee would be, they would also avoid such a village like the plague. No, this was not a place for the religious people of that time. But maybe, just maybe, the people of that village were more faithful to their religion than all the so-called religious people. Maybe because they lived in no man’s land they really learned what the law meant when it said we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

Certainly the lepers learned to get along with each other even if one was a Samaritan and the others were Jews. But this is not surprising. After all, lepers were outcasts. To a good Jew, few things could be worse than contact with a Samaritan, and certainly the Samaritans felt the same way about the Jews. But they would much rather have contact with each other than with a leper. No one wanted to have anything to do with a leper. But the lepers did not care if their fellow leper was a Jew or Samaritan. The fact that they were all outcasts made them all brothers. This no man's land was a very appropriate place for lepers. To be a leper is to live in no man's land.

And we see this in our reading. Luke tells us they stood at a distance and pleaded for Jesus to help them. Lepers knew better than to get too close to anyone who wasn't a leper. It is unclear whether they were asking for alms or healing. This was late in his ministry, so it was common knowledge that Jesus had healed a great many people. How much common knowledge comes into the life of outcasts like the lepers is hard to say. They call him by name, so perhaps they are aware that he is said to have great powers. But Jesus doesn't say he will heal them. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. The priests are the only ones who can certify that someone has been cleansed and can reenter society. The lepers would have recognized this as a declaration that they would be cleansed.

And so the lepers go. Luke tells us, "And as they went they were cleansed." Such a simple sentence, and yet so full of meaning. "As they went they were cleansed." Often that is how it is for us also. As WE go, as we travel on the journey our lives, we too are cleansed. Physical healing is like that. We may have to spend some time in the hospital and do almost all of our recovery there. But more likely, we see the doctor and the doctor give us some medicine and over time, as we go on with our lives, the medicine cures us. We may go in for special treatments, but we still recover over time, as we live our lives our bodies improve. As we go, we are healed.

Spiritual healing is even more so. We may have a moment of great insight. We may have a moment of special closeness with God. But it is the integrating of these moments into the fabric of our lives that really makes the differences. As we go, we are healed.

G. K. Chesterton was packing his bags in his London apartment one day. A friend came in asked where he was going. Chesterton surprisingly replied that he was on his way to London. Somewhat taken back by this answer, the friend reminded Chesterton that he was already in London. To this, the great writer replied with a characteristic twist, "No," he said, "that's where you're wrong. I no longer see London. Familiarity has closed my eyes. The real meaning of travel is to come home again and see it as though for the first time. So I really am on my way to London though I'll go by way of Paris, Rome, and Dresden." We are all on a journey home. Along the way we need healing from time to time. We need more healing than we are aware of often times. We need more healing than we are willing to admit.

In the journey of our lives, there are many detours. Some of these are necessary, some of them are wonderful, and some of them we would have been

wiser to avoid. One of the ten lepers takes a detour on the journey Jesus has sent him on. Like Chesterton, he returns to his starting place, only much sooner than he expected. Luke tells us, "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet."

Now I have called this a detour and so it was. It was an unplanned change of his travel plans. But it was not a detour like we are used to experiencing when we are traveling from place to place. When we drive down the road and we see a detour sign, we are not happy campers. We may still have plenty of time to make our destination, but we still don't like to see that detour sign. And if the detour might possibly cause us to be late, then we're really upset. We do not like detours.

Once I was flying from Fresno to Palm Springs to visit my parents when they had a condo out in Palm Desert. I had to change planes in Los Angeles. I discovered that the plane out of LA was delayed indefinitely because Palm Springs, of all places, was fogged in. The airport had been closed for 24 hours and they didn't know when it would open. How odd, usually it is Fresno that gets fogged in. Palm Springs is almost always sunny. So a number of us booked a mini van and headed to the Palm Springs airport in the midst of Friday afternoon LA rush hour traffic. As luck would have it, the fog lifted and the plane I would have been on landed just as our van got there. We hate to be forced to make a detour.

But the leper was not forced to make a detour. This was his own choice. That's a whole different kind of detour. When we decide to take a detour, rather than being forced into one, it's usually a lot of fun. Sometimes you can get lost on a detour, but even then it can be an adventure. The leper's detour is one of great joy. He probably didn't even consider whether to make this unplanned change or not. He saw that Jesus had healed him, and he returned to give thanks. It was just a natural reaction.

But what is natural for one, is not necessarily natural for others. Only one returned. The nine others did not. We do not know how long it took the one to return. Presumably it was a very short time. We don't know if all ten were still together when one turned back. They would have had different destinations as the Samaritan would be going to a Samaritan priest and the Jews to a Jewish priest. But if it did happen early on they were likely to be still together. You have to wonder what the nine thought when the one took his detour. Surely he said something, at the very least a shout of joy at his being healed. Nonetheless, the nine did not follow him back to Jesus.

It seems to me that in returning to give thanks the one man was making a commitment to Jesus. I'm sure the other nine were grateful, but not grateful enough to alter their plans. The people of Saint Clement's have always had grateful hearts. That goes along with your strong commitment to the Lord. I can say that even though I have only been here three years. You have an excellent reputation. And I know that you will remember that in two Sundays as we turn in our pledge cards and celebrate another successful ingathering. Thankful hearts and strong commitments go hand-in-hand.

When he saw the one return Jesus said, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?” It is suggested that Jesus says this with a touch of humor for he knows perfectly well where the nine are. They are going where he sent them, to the priest. There is nothing wrong in that. They need to go to the priest. They need to have their healing confirmed so that they can be readmitted into society. Surely the one who returned would soon be going to his priest, but first he has something important to do, something joyful.

Jesus is using this opportunity to teach us something – something important, something joyful. He says, “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Like the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is telling us that those who society rejects as sinners can still do the will of God. More importantly, Jesus is asking us why we do not return and praise God more often. Why do we not take more detours?

It had been too long since Horace Walpole smiled. Too long. Life for him had become as drab as the weather in dreary old England. Then on a grim winter day in 1754, while reading a Persian fairy tale, his smile returned. He wrote his longtime friend, Horace Mann, telling him of the thrilling approach to life he had discovered from the folk tale how it had freed him from his dark prison of gloom.

The ancient tale told of three princes from the island of Ceylon who set out on a pursuit of great treasures. They never found that for which they searched, but en route they were continually surprised by delights they had never anticipated. While looking for one thing, they found another.

The original name of Ceylon was Serendip, which explains the title of the story – “The three princes of Serendip.” From that Walpole coined the wonderful word serendipity. And from then on, his most significant and valued experiences were those that happened to him while he was least expecting them.

Like the princes of Serendip, the ten lepers were looking for one thing of great value, in their case healing. Unlike the princes, the lepers found the thing they were looking for. But the one leper who returned also found something else. Jesus says to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” Now all ten lepers were healed, but nine only received physical healing. I do not mean to belittle physical healing. It is a wonderful and blessed thing, and next Sunday we will celebrate it and honor those we participate in it. Physical healing is a wonderful thing. But the leper who returned received not only healing of his body but also healing of his soul. It was available for all ten, but the other nine were so concerned about the duties of the law and the importance of having their healing verified, that they forgot to take a detour and give thanks to God. And so they denied themselves the greater healing.

But fortunately for them, they still had ample opportunity to avail themselves of the greater healing. There is always an opportunity to give thanks to God. It is never too late. And perhaps at some point, maybe even before they reached the priest, maybe years after, maybe they realized that they too should have taken a detour and given thanks to God. We too forget sometimes, and we too always have another chance. Poet Richard Mant puts the story this way:

And so the jealous Law,

With care benignant, tho' severe,  
 Forbids you sons of grief to draw  
 Your brethren's healthful dwellings near;  
 And sends you forth from Israel's camp to roam,  
 Outcasts from men and social home;  
 To dwell in friendless solitude alone,  
 Or herd with those who pine with sorrows like your own.

But there is one, who near  
 Or from afar your griefs can feel:  
 All merciful your plaints to hear;  
 All powerful your wounds to heal.  
 And ye have found him: and his ear hath heard  
 Your suppliant cries: and hark! His word,  
 "Go shew yourselves, your offerings, to the priest:  
 Let him, so Moses bids, the leper's health attest!"

But what is this I see?  
 Low prostrate at the Savior's feet,  
 One form is thrown in ecstasy,  
 The Author of his health to greet.  
 Ten were the sick, the mournful, suppliant men;  
 And mercy shone on all the ten:  
 Ten felt that mercy make the body whole;  
 But one alone has felt its influence on the soul.

Alas, but one alone,  
 And he of scorn'd Samaria's race,  
 Is found with grateful heart to own,  
 Whence flow'd that miracle of grace!  
 But one is found to manifest abroad  
 The glory of a healing God:  
 But one to hear th' approving Savior say,  
 "Thy faith hath made thee whole: arise, and go thy  
 way!"

Let us pray