

September 10, 2023

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Text: Luke 17:11-19; Galatians 5:16-24

This morning's text from Luke 17 shares several elements from last week's – the Parable of the Good Samaritan. For one, both mention a Samaritan who does good. For another, both deal with the theme of mercy. And third, both pointedly end with Jesus giving the command: "Go."

Last week, we heard Him tell the lawyer, "Go and do likewise." This morning, He tells the cleansed leper, "Go, your faith has made you well," or more literally, "saved you." He tells His whole Church this, as well: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..."

Our Lord tells us to go. And in His word, He also tells us where and how to go. That's what we'll be considering this morning.

Yet before you know where you're going, it helps to know where you've been. We see this in the cleansed Samaritan, and it helps us to understand where he goes and why.

This man's life before being healed by Jesus would have been one of great suffering. Leprosy could range from painful sores and rashes to parts of one's body literally rotting off.

It also isolated one from the rest of society, not only because of the regulations God had given concerning it, but let's be honest, would you want to be around someone who looked like the people on the bulletin cover? To be a leper was to be an outcast and beggar, someone without hope.

But then comes Jesus. Word about Him had spread, to the point that even lepers living outside villages knew of Him. They knew that He has performed all manner of miracles and healings, and done so out of love and mercy.

So these ten men, rather than the usual cry of "Unclean! Unclean!" yell out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" And what does Jesus do? "When He saw them He said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.'" Jesus tells them to go, and understood in His command is that they would be cleansed – otherwise there was no point in going to the priest to be examined and declared clean.

And so in obedience to His command, the ten set off, headed to the priests. We then read in the account, "And as they went they were cleansed." The Lord had been faithful to His word and cleansed them of this terrible condition. They were restored – restored in their bodies, restored to their communities, restored to their families and and friends.

Through the mercy of Jesus, they had been brought from a place of utter misery to a place of fullness and restoration.

We too have been granted restoration by the Lord Jesus out of His mercy, though the restoration we've been given is much, much greater. We were rotting spiritually, our souls decaying with the disease of sin. This sin, like leprosy, produces many painful effects, things like sadness, anxiety, strife, anger.

Also like leprosy, sin isolates us, both causing broken relationships here on earth, but even more so causing us to be separated from God. God is pure and holy, the one who is perfection and goodness. Sin cannot exist in His presence; the impurity and the one who bears it would be destroyed – not because God delights in destroying people, but simply by the reality of who He is and what it means that He is holy.

And so we were cut off from the source of all goodness and peace and life itself, wandering as hopeless beggars until death claims us.

But the God who showed mercy to the lepers is the God who shows mercy to all mankind. He comes, in our flesh, to take all our leprosy of sin and guilt and shame into Himself. He takes all this to the cross, and there offers Himself as the cleansing sacrifice, washing it away with His precious blood. As the Scriptures powerfully state, “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

The pure, spotless Lamb of God took all our filth and decay of sin into Himself, and in return He has purified us, giving us His very righteousness. By this we are restored to our Father in heaven, given peace which the world cannot give, promised joy that will never end, blessed with life that death cannot take away. Like those lepers, we are given new lives.

So what do we do with these new lives? Where do we go? Let’s look again to the lepers. Nine of them, realizing that they’ve been cleansed, keep heading toward the temple, off to find the priests.

And we might wonder, “What’s wrong with that? Isn’t that what Jesus told them to do?” True enough, Jesus did send them that way. The problem lies in why they are headed to the priests. They are headed that way out of obedience to the command.

Lacking, however, is any sort of thanksgiving, gladness, or other evidences of faith. They’re following the letter of the law, so to speak, while completely missing the spirit, the character of mercy and love of the one who spoke it.

We know this because of how the one other leper acts and Jesus’ response to His actions. When this one man realizes he’s been made whole by Jesus, he doesn’t just continue on to the temple. No, he turns around and heads back to Jesus.

And as he goes, he is shouting and praising God. When he finally gets to Jesus, he falls on his face and gives Him thanks. This is not just a “hey thanks,” though. This is the posture and words of worship. The man is publicly proclaiming that this Jesus is the God who is worthy of thanksgiving and praise, the God who can cure the incurable, the God who is full of steadfast love and mercy.

Did Jesus tell him to do any of this? No! But the man has faith, as Jesus states, and faith produces such words and actions. Faith, worked in the man’s heart by God the Holy Spirit, led him to return to Jesus and worship. Faith led him to realize that this Jesus is the new temple, the place where God dwells with man, and that Jesus is the great high priest, the one who perfectly intercedes to the Father for men.

God has worked faith and healing in this man, and because faith can’t help but praise God and confess God’s word, the man returned.

Jesus then tells the man to go forth, his faith having made him well, or again, having saved him. Will the man turn and trudge back to the temple? No, why would he? The Bible doesn’t tell us exactly where this man went, but we know that he had been given faith. He has been given faith in this Jesus, the Messiah, whom the prophets said would bring in the New Testament.

And this faith will lead him to proclaim this fact to those he encounters. When he returns to his family, this former leper will declare the wonderful works of the God who has saved him.

And undoubtedly, the man would continue to seek out Jesus and hear his words, because as another great confession of faith declares – spoken by the Apostle Peter – “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” In this cleansed leper, we see that faith leads us to confess Christ and worship Him for the great gifts He has given to us in mercy.

That’s the response which faith works in our hearts as well. Having been cleansed from our sins by the Lord and given faith and new life, where do we go? We have a few options, actually, for while it is totally the Lord’s work to bring us faith, He does give us the ability after that to choose to continue in faith or to reject it.

This rejection is what St. Paul warns against in our reading from Galatians. Remember, he is writing to the Church, to Christians, to refrain from giving in to the desires of the flesh. Just because you are a Christian, just because you’ve been baptized, that doesn’t mean that you’re never going to be tempted to sin. And we all know that from firsthand experience.

Where the warning is especially needed is how dangerous these temptations can be. Paul writes, “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

The Bible doesn’t teach “once saved, always saved.” If you choose to indulge in the desires of the flesh rather than fight against them, if you choose to try to justify or excuse your sins rather than repent of them, you risk losing your salvation.

The man could have headed right on back to the leper colony and lived as he had before. And maybe he wouldn’t have caught leprosy again right away. But had he heard Jesus say, “Go,” and then gone right back to his old way of life, it would have only been a matter of time before the horrible disease came back.

Those who return to their old sinful ways of life, or pursue new and different ones that still go against God’s word, they push against the Holy Spirit, and eventually He will depart.

In addition to outright rejection, there is another path than can be taken that leads away from Christ. This would be seen in the nine lepers who don’t return in faith and thanksgiving. Jesus said to go to the temple, so they’ll go. They’ll jump through the hoops and check the boxes. They’ll do what He said, but nothing more.

This is the more common route to leaving the faith. These people are cleansed, granted faith and new life. Confronted with the desires of the flesh, they don’t give in right away, or suddenly.

Over time, however, being a Christian becomes seen as a work, something you do. The fruits of faith, such as thanksgiving or faithfulness, become replaced with self-driven efforts that see the gifts of God as burdens.

Jesus says to go to church in a Commandment, but He doesn’t say how often I have to go, so I’ll just go what I decide is “enough,” maybe once a quarter, or at least at Christmas and Easter, or when there’s a funeral.

God’s word isn’t seen as an incredible treasure, the revelation of the Almighty to man, the sword which drives back the devil, but just a book that you have to listen to when you come here, and one that you have to dust when you clean your shelves, so I’ll read or hear whatever the minimum amount is to go to heaven.

Being part of the Church goes from rejoicing in being joined to the one holy Christian and apostolic Church, the bride of Christ that has endured throughout history and will endure into eternity when all organizations and kingdoms and this planet will have been destroyed, to having your name on the rolls of a congregation somewhere and assuming that your confirmation certificate will get you into heaven.

Such mechanical, dead “faith” that seeks only to satisfy the minimum requirements, if it goes on long enough, eventually leads to the same place as the outright pursuit of fleshly desires: a loss of salvation.

So where do we go, then? We follow the path of the Samaritan leper, the path of faith.

We seek to hear and learn the words of our Lord, for through them He has promised to strengthen our faith and draw us closer to Him.

We seek to put to death the works of the flesh in our lives, and in their place exercise the fruits that the Spirit grows in our hearts: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

We look at the gifts that Christ gives, His word and His Sacrament, as blessings which we seek opportunities to receive, not burdens that we must grudgingly bear.

We strive to share the wonderful Gospel of the Lord who saved us with the world, just as the leper ran back praising God and openly worshiped at Jesus’ feet.

We do all this, not because we’re forced to, but because we realize what great mercy God has shown to us, what it means that we are His children, how incredible it is that we have been saved from the fires of hell and granted eternal life in paradise! All as a free gift!

Now, there are plenty of times where life as a Christian isn’t full of joy and love and peace, at least in a worldly sense. There are times when things are hard, when suffering abounds.

That doesn’t mean that we’re not Christians, though, or that Jesus didn’t actually restore us. The Christian life is a life of deliverance and restoration by God, and it is also a life lived in a broken, sinful world until Christ takes us out of it.

The restored leper was certainly blessed by God with a wonderful new life. But he was still a Samaritan, and that entailed plenty of struggle at times, like we heard last week.

You Christians have all been granted faith and forgiveness and life by Jesus, but your old sinful flesh still clings to you. Note how St. Paul describes it in the Epistle: “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Crucifixion wasn’t an instant death, as we know from the crucifixion of our Lord Himself. It was a slow death, and a painful one.

As Christians, our sinful selves have been crucified. They are being destroyed by the Holy Spirit, and the Lord will bring us to the day when we are completely restored in perfection and holiness. But our sinful flesh is dying a slow death, and our struggle against it is painful. We’ll still be tempted to give into its desires, and resisting those temptations, especially when the world and the devil join in the attack, can be very painful to resist.

Yet as we fight against these sinful desires, we don’t fight them alone. In Holy Baptism, when you were cleansed from your leprosy of sin, God the Holy Spirit came to dwell in your heart. And as the Bible says, “the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh.” The God who in mercy saved you now dwells within you, and He fights against those forces that would lead you to destruction.

He is the God who will strengthen you to stand, to follow Christ even when it seems that everyone is walking the opposite way, like the single leper going opposite the nine others.

He is the God who intercedes for you, giving you words to cry out to the Father when you can't find them on your own.

He is the God who works through the word and through the Supper of Christ to grow your faith, even when you can't feel it or understand how He could do that. Walk in the Spirit, as St. Paul says, and He will preserve you from the desires of the flesh and the dangers they hold.

Like the Samaritan leper, you have been cleansed from death and given new life in Christ as a part of His Church. He now tells us to "go" and be His witnesses in the world. We don't do this alone, but rather go forth with the light of faith in our hearts and God the Holy Spirit guiding us.

Even in our struggles, the Spirit lets us see this as evidence that we have been joined to Christ, and if we are sharing in His crucifixion, we will certainly share in His resurrection.

In the name of Jesus, amen.