

Lepers and Deadbeats Sermon or Being Made Whole
C46: 18th Sunday after Pentecost
October 9th, 2022, ASFES

This sermon is based on Luke 17:11-19

A few years ago, I went to a continuing education event in the Twin Cities. I met a pastor there named Kevin. Pastor Kevin was telling me about his mother-in-law who had passed away. She was a kind and generous person, most of the time, but she could be a little judgmental. She had no patience at all for what she saw as bad manners.

When Kevin and his wife were moving his mother-in-law out of her home and into an assisted living facility, they found a strange envelope. It was plain except for one word that she had written in ink across the front of it. It said deadbeats...and it was underlined... **twice**.

When Kevin and his wife had gotten married decades ago, it was a very traditional affair. At the reception, each guest who had rsvp'd had a place card with their name and table number on it so they would know where to sit. When the reception was over, Kevin's mother-in-law gathered up the place cards of the people who did not show up for the wedding reception and put them in that envelope and marked it, "deadbeats."

I bet she would have put those 9 lepers who did not come back and say thank-you to Jesus in that envelope.

Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem. Near Samaria, ten lepers found him. Most of us have heard at least a little bit about leprosy, or Hansen's disease. It's been around for thousands of years. It wasn't until the 1940's that a treatment was found. It wasn't until the 1970's that a cure was found and put into widespread use. Thank God we don't make people live in leper colonies anymore!

You've probably never seen a leper. My daughter is in her second year of college, and she is taking microbiology. She explained why leprosy is not much of a problem for us today. Today, 95 percent of people are immune to leprosy. The ones who are not immune can be treated with antibiotics, so you can cross leprosy off your list of worries for today. She also told me that leprosy or Hansen's disease can be passed from armadillos to humans and vice versa. We live in rural Wisconsin, so I imagine that is not going to be a big problem for us.

Leprosy was different during the time Jesus walked the earth. The disease they had was probably not Hansen's disease. What we do know is that it was a dreadful skin condition that had no cure. The lepers of Jesus' day were the living dead. This is because they were separated from their families and everything else that they loved. No one would touch them or come near them. They weren't just sick; they were cast out. They were ritually unclean, so they couldn't even go to worship. They rang little bells to warn others that they were coming so that people knew to get away. For some reason, I found that little detail to be

especially sad. How demeaning to be reduced to wearing a bell, like the ones we put on our cats' collars.

Not surprisingly, the lepers called out to Jesus to have mercy on them. Jesus responded by telling them to "go and show themselves to the priests."

The background information that we need to know to understand this better is from the 14th chapter of Leviticus. If someone was ever cured of leprosy, they could gain readmission to the temple, and to the rest of society. They had to go to the priest to be examined and ritually purified. The priest would certify that they were "clean." Jesus told the ten lepers to do this. "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

On the way to see the priests, the ten lepers were healed. One of the ten came back and threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanks him. Jesus asked an obvious question. What happened to the other nine? He healed 10 and only one said thank-you.

Reading this text, it's easy to take that fraction of one tenth and apply it to our lives. Maybe **we** only turn to the Lord and say thank-you ten percent of the times that we should. One pastor I know says that 10 percent is about the right ratio. When he looks out in worship on any given Sunday, he only sees about 10 percent of the children he has baptized. He only sees about 10 percent of his confirmation students.

It's easy to judge other people—to put them in an envelope marked deadbeats, but if we look into our own hearts, we know we are not as thankful as we should be. I know that Jesus said judge not lest you not be judged, and yet I sometimes find myself judging others when they don't act like I think they should. We have no idea what is going on in another person's life and yet we feel like it is okay to condemn them.

Did you ever wonder why all the lepers didn't go back and say thank-you? Before we judge those other nine as deadbeats, let's remember something. The other nine did nothing wrong. They did exactly as they were told. All of them were healed. They were told to go and show themselves to the priest and that is what they were doing. Then they went home to rejoin their families and their community.

The one who turns back is different. He paused and took the time to really appreciate the blessing he had received. Then, he went back to say thank-you. He was blessed a second time. You might wonder about that. Blessed a second time? Wasn't he just made well like the others? Yes, but Jesus tells him, your faith has made you well. He doesn't mean well like your skin is all better. The Greek word in this case is "sodzo" and it means saved or whole. This man is now right in his body **and** his spirit. He's doubly blessed.

He gets the blessing of healing, just like the other nine. But he also gets the blessing that comes from *recognizing*

blessing and *giving thanks*. He gets wholeness and joy.

In noticing and giving thanks, the original blessing is multiplied. He's blessed a second time.

It takes practice to become a grateful person. One way that I have found helpful is to keep a journal and just write down the things that you are thankful for every day. Another way is to practice saying thank-you to someone every day. A third way is to help others see the blessings that are all around us.

During the beginning of the pandemic, when we all had to stay inside our houses, my husband decided to take up bird watching. We have a big picture window in our living room. He hung all different types of bird feeders in the yard where we could see them. I was not on board for bird watching. It just didn't seem very exciting to me. I was sad to be stuck at home and some birds eating seeds seemed like a small consolation to me.

I was wrong. I had no idea there were so many beautiful birds that would come to our yard. We live near a creek and a lot of trees. We had the birds that I expected like cardinals and blue jays, but we had so many that I had never seen before. My teenage daughters would yell, "Come and look Mom, there is a golden finch!" or "Wow, it's an indigo bunting!" Their excitement made me see how blessed we were to see these multicolored wonders of nature. Pointing out God's blessings to others multiplies the blessing.

I bet that 10th leper told every person he saw that Jesus had healed him. I bet he couldn't stop talking about it. He was a source of joy and faith for people around him.

Giving thanks happens when you praise God in the sanctuary, when you say grace in your dining room, and even when you are in a parking lot with strangers.

Not long ago, I was rushing around doing my Saturday errands. I pulled into the grocery store parking lot. When I got out of my car, there were several people just standing there leaning on their cars. I was about to just keep going when an older woman said to me, "Look at the sky!" I stopped and looked at the sky and it was the brightest, closest looking rainbow I had ever seen. It was right over our heads. We all just stood there feeling amazed and blessed and grateful. It felt almost holy sharing that moment with strangers. I am so glad that woman didn't keep quiet. I am so glad she told me to look up so that I didn't miss the blessing of seeing a rainbow that day.

Gratitude is a noble emotion. Gratitude draws us out of ourselves into something larger, brighter, and grander than we could imagine. It joins us to the font of blessing itself. It frees us from fear, releases us from anxiety, and emboldens us to do more and dare more than we'd ever imagined.

Gratitude helped that tenth leper be brave and joyful enough to go back and thank Jesus. He was a Samaritan and the Jews and the Samaritans normally had nothing to

do with each other. Gratitude helped him to bridge that gap.

That's what the nine missed. It is not that they were deadbeats. It's not that they did anything wrong; it's that they didn't voice their blessing. They received physical healing, but they missed out on being made whole.

Your life is full of blessings and difficulties, which will you focus on? Which will you shout about? Will you take the time to notice the parts of your life that have been healed? Will you turn back to say thank-you in a big way? Are you willing to throw yourself at Jesus' feet and be grateful for all you have been given? Don't miss the opportunity to testify now, while you have the chance. Be the 10th leper, be the joyful child of God you were created to be.

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