Our God and Priest

Luke 17:11-19
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)
October 12, 2025
Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND
Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 17, verses 11 through 19. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 17, beginning at verse 11, we read in Jesus' name.

> **11** On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. **12** And as
> he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance **13** and lifted up
> their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." **14** When he saw them he said to
> them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed.
> **15** Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a
> loud voice; **16** and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a
> Samaritan. **17** Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? **18** Was
> no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" **19** And he said to
> him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."
>
> *Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*
> You may be seated.
> Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the Son of God. He is our Great High Priest. He is the sacrifice that heals you from sin. And he restores you to life by the power of his resurrection.

This is one of those stories about Jesus that fascinates me. There is a plain and obvious meaning: Jesus has power to heal; therefore, we should call upon him for help and worship him with thankfulness in our hearts. It's a great example of thanksgiving, so the lectionary prescribes it as the gospel reading for Thanksgiving every year, and I often preach on it for our evening service before Thanksgiving. Therefore, I have rarely used it when it comes up on a Sunday morning.

But, in addition to these obvious meanings of Jesus' power to heal and our response of thanksgiving, there are some neat little details that bring out beautiful facets of this story and the work of Jesus.

In verse 11, Luke reminds us that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. This was a journey that began in chapter 9, where Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). Jesus, like the rest of the Jews, travelled to Jerusalem several times a year for various feasts. Perhaps the most significant of these feasts was Passover, which Jesus and his disciples were travelling to on this occasion. However, there was a greater reason than the celebration of Passover. It was during this Passover that Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world and was raised on the third day. Along the way, Jesus predicted, at least three times, that he would be crucified and raised from the dead (9:22; 9:44; 18:31-33). It was the purpose of his trip. In fact, it was the entire purpose of his life. Under normal circumstances, it would take a few days to walk from Galilee, where Jesus and his disciples lived, to Jerusalem. It's similar to the distance between Grand Forks and Fargo. But on

this occasion, it took Jesus significantly longer—it seems like it was several weeks—because he toured through all the villages along the way to teach and heal.

This account occurs as Jesus was passing between Galilee and Samaria (17:11), so he is just leaving the region of Galilee in the north. As he enters a village, he is met by ten lepers (17:12).

Leprosy is a skin disease. It's less common today than it was in the ancient world. It's also curable now, and the few who suffer from it do not need to isolate into colonies. But it was a bad thing to get in ancient times. Sufferers develop lesions or splotches on their skin. It also causes nerve damage, which eventually leads to paralysis and even the loss of limbs. When someone loses feeling in their extremities, like their hands or their feet, they don't notice when they injure those members, and they can become infected before a person realizes it, leading to the eventual loss of limbs.

Leprosy is curable now. But in the ancient world, it was not. And since it affected the skin, it was pretty obvious, just by looking at a person, that they had it. So nobody wanted lepers around. It is contagious, but much less so in places where good hygiene is practiced. In ancient times, lepers were banished from cities and had to live in colonies with other lepers. That's why these ten lepers are together and outside of the village.

In terms of religious life, the Law of Moses declared them unclean (Lev. 13:2-3). And I should emphasize that to be unclean under the Law of Moses did not mean that a person had sinned in some way to become unclean. It was not intended to be a moral judgment on the person. A person could become unclean through no fault of their own. It simply meant that they were excluded from the temple during the time of their uncleanness. However, the Jews did eventually attach a moral judgment to ceremonial uncleanness, especially for things like leprosy. It's a sort of karmic assumption, which infects a lot of religions, that thinks that we get what we deserve in this life. Therefore, if a person contracts leprosy or some other infirmity, people assumed they must have done something immoral to deserve it. But wherever Jesus confronts this idea, he refutes it. Bad things happen because of the fall into sin. And there are natural consequences to many of our actions in this life. But to look for a moral or spiritual reason for why things happen to some people and not others is an attempt to pry into the hidden mind of God, which no one can do. These ten men were not being punished by God. They contracted a disease. That's all.

They stood at a distance from Jesus and his disciples. The civil law required that they stay away from uninfected people. And they said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (17:13). They don't seem to recognize Jesus as the Son of God, otherwise they would have called him "Lord" (κύριος, *kyrios*). "Master" (ἐπιστάτης) is a lesser title, but they mean no disrespect by it; it is still a title of respect. They may not recognize Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, but they do know that he is a miracle worker. They have an expectation that he can heal them.

Jesus replied, "Go and show yourselves to the priests" (17:14). This is interesting. We see the power of Jesus' Word. There are many examples in Scripture that reveal the power of the Word of God. God speaks, and things happen. At creation, God said, "Let there be light," and there was (Gen. 1:3). He said the same thing regarding water, sky, land, birds, fish, vegetation, and animals. God spoke it all into existence. Ezekiel prophesied the Word of the LORD over dry bones, and they came to life (Ezek. 37). Jesus expelled demons, even deaf ones, by commanding them to come out (Mark 9:25). He raised Lazarus back to life simply by telling him to come out of the tomb (John 11:43). Those are just a few of the many examples. The Word of God has power to effect change in the physical and spiritual realm. Therefore, when the Word of God—the Scriptures—make promises, you can be certain that they will come to pass. When the Bible

teaches that your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, you can be certain of that. And because Jesus has given his Church authority on earth to forgive sins (Matt. 16:19; 18:18-20; Luke 17:3; John 20:23), you can be certain that when I, or another pastor, or another Christian declares to you that your sins are forgiven, they really are forgiven. That is not merely the declaration of man; it is the declaration of God. That declaration of God forgives your sins, because Jesus has paid for those sins by his innocent sufferings and death, it is his will to forgive your sins, and the Word of God is powerful to do what it says. God's Word does what it says. So these ten lepers are healed by the words of Jesus.

It's not instantaneous, though. Sometimes it is, but here, Jesus' intention is that it would happen as they are going. So it requires faith on behalf of these lepers. Without faith, I don't suppose they would have received the benefits of Jesus' declaration. To be clear, faith does not earn God's favor. Faith is not a work we do to merit God's love, but it receive the gifts he promises. So these ten men start walking to see the priests, and as they are walking, they are healed. This must have been quite the experience. Their bodies had been degenerating. Itchy, losing feeling. But as they obey the command of Jesus, their skin heals. The sores go away, and their skin is fresh again. Feeling comes back into their fingers and toes.

Nine of these men keep walking. Jesus commanded them to go and show themselves to the priests. This is what the LORD revealed to Moses in Leviticus 13 and 14. One of the duties of priests was to examine cases of leprosy and declare a person either clean or unclean. So if a leper was healed in some way, the Law required that a priest examine him before he could be declared clean and readmitted into society. There was also a sacrifice required, which was performed by the priests. All of the priests were at the temple in Jerusalem, so that's where these men were going. There's something strategic about this or helpful to Jesus. Remember, Jesus is going to Jerusalem too, but he's taking his time, so these lepers will arrive before him. And it would be quite the deal to have these nine lepers show up, all claiming to have been healed by Jesus. Will the priests believe in Jesus? It seems that they did not, but when Jesus does finally arrive in Jerusalem, there are many people there who are eagerly waiting for him, and the testimony of these nine former lepers probably contributed to their excitement. So we can't be too hard on these nine for proceeding to Jerusalem instead of returning to Jesus. After all, it is what Jesus told them to do.

But there is one man who turns back to thank and praise Jesus. The interesting thing about this man is that he was a Samaritan. We've talked about the Samaritans before. They were ancient relatives of the Jews. Both groups were Israelites, but, long story short, in the 800s BC, they began intermarrying with foreigners who were shipped into Samaria when the Assyrians conquered them. The Jews disapproved of this, so there was some bad blood between them. Their worship practices also diverged from there. It seems that the other nine, or at least most of them, were Jews. Jesus also was a Jew. So it's striking that the only one to turn back and give thanks to Jesus is a Samaritan.

There are two little details in these last few verses that reveal some specific things about Jesus. First, the Samaritan man fell on his face before Jesus. This is an act of divine worship. Twice in Revelation, the apostle John fell down at the feet of an angel, and the angel quickly rebuked him, saying, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers" (Rev. 19:10; 22:9). This is an act of worship, and the angels refuse to accept it, because it is sinful to worship anyone but the true God. But Jesus does accept it. When people fall down at Jesus' feet, he does not refuse their worship. And by not refusing their worship, he is proclaiming himself to be the Son of God. This is not breaking news for us. Every Sunday we

confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and we talk about it a lot. But if we put ourselves into the scene of Jesus and this man, this is profound. It's life-changing. For this Samaritan man, it's not simply a matter of being cured of leprosy. That becomes a secondary matter to him. The primary thing is that he found God, or God found him. And now he is face-to-face, or face-to-feet, with the true God. Imagine the realization that this man standing before you is no ordinary man. And he's not just a miracle worker either. Nor is he merely a prophet. But this man is God. And he's gracious to you. He is the God of the Jews. He is the true God. But he is gracious and accepting of this Samaritan man. He's not an outcast. Prior to this moment, he was an outcast from the Jews. Because of his leprosy, he was even an outcast from among his own people. But he is not an outcast to God. He is not an outcast to Jesus. And this is the disposition of Jesus toward all who come to him in repentance and faith. It is not that we clean ourselves up first. We cannot cleanse our hearts from sin any more than this man could cleanse his skin of leprosy. But we bring that to Jesus, and he cleanses us.

Many Christians throughout history have picked up on leprosy being an appropriate metaphor for sin, especially before it was curable. It doesn't capture the whole concept of sin. I don't think the metaphor illustrates original sin very well, because original sin infects us from conception, but it does illustrate the way unrepentant sin can infect us and spread. When it goes unchecked, or unrepented of, it infects our whole being. It spreads to all the corners of our hearts. It leads us to hide from God and from others in the Church, so it separates us from the fellowship of God, like leprosy separated people from their communities. Unrepentant sin dulls our consciences, much like the way leprosy attacks the nervous system. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin through his Word and through our consciences. But whenever we refuse to repent, we are resisting that conviction of the Holy Spirit, and our consciences become numb to it. It's similar to the way leprosy could cause someone to not feel their fingers or toes anymore. The longer we let unrepentant sin remain, our consciences become numb to it, and we just don't feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit anymore. And this is incredibly dangerous to us. We can have sin that is threatening to overtake our souls, but we might resist conviction to the point where we don't feel the guilt of it anymore, so we just don't feel like we need to repent. Eventually, it kills us. Sin, like leprosy used to be in the ancient world, is incurable. We can't make ourselves better. Our good works—a sort of spiritual "diet and exercise"—cannot solve the leprosy of sin. We cannot cure it. We cannot reverse it. It needs to be healed by Christ. So the greatest similarity between leprosy and sin is that Jesus has power over them. Just as he exercised power over the leprosy of those ten men, he has power over sin. He won victory over sin and death when he assumed all sins at the cross and suffered death for them.

So we bring our sins to our great high priest, Jesus, who offered himself as a sacrifice for all sins. This is the second little detail that reveals something significant and special about Jesus. After the Samaritan came back to worship Jesus, Jesus did not send him to the priests, like he initially instructed all ten. Why not? It was the Law that for a leper to be cleansed, he needed to appear before the priest, who declared him clean, and bring an offering, which the priest presented before the LORD. But Jesus merely says to this man, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (17:19). There was no need for another priest to declare this man clean, because Jesus, the Great High Priest, had declared him clean, and Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, not to offer some small sacrifice, like a bird or a lamb (Lev. 14:5, 12), but to offer himself as the sacrifice for the entire world. When Jesus released this man, he was not circumventing the Law, because Jesus fulfilled the Law for this man and for all who trust in him. Jesus is the Great High Priest and the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Confess your sins to Jesus. Sometimes we feel our sins acutely, and we know that we need forgiveness. Other times, we don't, and we need God's Law, like the Ten Commandments, to reveal to us that our hearts are not right. When we know from God's Word that something in our life is wrong, but we do not feel it in our hearts, that is when we should be the most concerned. That is when we should pray, *Lord Jesus, have mercy on me. I know that my thoughts, words, and deeds are an abomination in your sight, but I don't even feel it. Have mercy on me. Forgive me. Restore to me a tender heart, that I may weep over those things that offend you, and learn to love those things that you have commanded.*

Jesus is the Son of God. He is our Great High Priest. He is the sacrifice that heals you from sin. And he restores you to life by the power of his resurrection. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.