

PENTECOST: IN FAITH WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)
October 14, 2007

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

The Grateful Samaritan

“One returned to give God thanks, but nine went away.”

These words are part of the refrain to a song I learned in Sunday School and which we sang whenever the story of the Ten Lepers was told. Indeed, remembering to give thanks and praise to God is at the heart of this story. But let's probe this story a little more.

When analyzed from a structural standpoint, this particular pericope, or unit of Scripture, falls within a section of Luke's Gospel referred to as the Travel Narrative to Jerusalem, which begins at 9:51 and extends through 18:14. It is in chapter 9, verses 51-53 that we read:

Not long before it was time for Jesus to be taken up to heaven, he made up his mind to go to Jerusalem. He sent some messengers on ahead to a Samaritan village to get things ready for him. But he was on his way to Jerusalem, so the people there refused to welcome him. (*CEV*)

Here in these three verses we get some indication of the ongoing rift between the Samaritans and the Jews during the time of Jesus. Jesus has been traveling toward Jerusalem, and we now find him at a point where he is passing between Galilee and Samaria. He is perhaps on the border where Samaria adjoins Galilee. Having been barred entry into Samaritan territory, Jesus turns eastward, passing between Samaria and Galilee. It is here, along the border, where Jesus' encounter with the lepers takes place, thus explaining perhaps why there is a Samaritan in the group. Furthermore, being on the border, not in one region or the other, seems to reinforce this sense of displacement for the lepers who were considered unclean and thus ostracized from community life.

The lepers see Jesus approaching and call to him from a distance. It's been said that leprosy gradually destroys the voice, so the ten of them would have needed to call out together in order to be heard. And their cry to Jesus for mercy reveals that they must have known about Jesus' power to heal. Not only do they call him by name, but they also use the title, “Master,” which is the equivalent of “Rabbi.”



What is Jesus' response? Unlike the healing of a leper as recorded earlier in chapter 5 of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus stretches forth his hand, touches the leper and says, "Be clean," in this case Jesus speaks to the ten men from a distance and instructs them to adhere to the Law of Moses, that is, to show themselves to the priests. According to the Law, the priests would need to certify their cure, that is, declare them "clean" and thus permit them to rejoin the community (Leviticus 13 – 14).

As one can imagine, these ten men must have been a bit perplexed by this. They were probably expecting a closer encounter. But Jesus remains at a distance. What should they do? Should they go to the priests? Did Jesus know that one of the ten was a Samaritan who therefore could not enter the temple in Jerusalem?

According to Luke's account, all ten act in accord with Jesus' instructions. And they were healed "on their way" (17:14). Then one of the ten, when he saw what was happening and that he was healed, turned back, shouting praises to God in a **loud** voice, and prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And it is at this point that the gospel writer very intentionally tells us that the one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan, a foreigner. Is Luke seeking to make a point?

The significance of this story, it appears, is not on the healing, but the outcome. Jesus tells the Samaritan, this "foreigner," that his faith has made him well. This Samaritan, by virtue of his ethnicity, is an outsider. But now, by virtue of his faith, he is a member of God's kingdom and brought into fellowship with Jesus because he trusted and believed and returned to express his gratitude.

Jesus refers to this Samaritan as a foreigner, and asks, "Why was this foreigner the only one who came back to thank God?" (17:18, *CEV*). In this pericope, the Greek term used for "foreigner" is *allogenes*, the same word that is used in the Jerusalem Temple inscription to exclude non-Jews from the court of Israel. So here we have one of those interesting status reversals such as are found throughout Luke's Gospel – a term used to signal exclusion is now used by Jesus in an inclusive way to demonstrate that, as the savior who heals the sick and extends forgiveness to the sinful, he now welcomes into God's family outcasts and those living on the fringes of society.

When Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well, Jesus is also saying that, through God's grace, the Samaritan has received more than physical healing and cleansing – he has received salvation. And with salvation, the Samaritan now has a new relationship with God that is defined by the grace of God. Thus, the healing of the lepers represents more than just another miracle of healing; it demonstrates Jesus' healing ministry whereby the kingdom of God breaks in upon the realm of disease and sin.

Yes, this pericope is marked by the theme of gratitude in response to God's goodness. Only one returned to give God thanks. How will you show your gratitude to God who first loved us?

This week's Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.



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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: England and Wales – With prayers for the impact of an arts and media campaign, being done jointly with the churches of Greater Manchester, designed to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the Bible, and with prayers for a developing relationship with the Roman Catholic Church; **France** – With thanks to God that many prisoners have received Bibles through donations from Christians, and with thanks to God for the strong support from churches that has enabled the funding of a Youth Bible project which involved the work of more than 70 editors – Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox – who took on the task enthusiastically, and with prayers that a new mobile Bible exhibition will be approved by education authorities.

Activity Corner: “Prayers of Gratitude” Leaves

Supplies needed: Bible; construction paper (assorted colors); leaf patterns; pens/pencils; scissors; bowl or basket.

Invite members of your household to trace a leaf on a sheet of construction paper. After cutting out the leaf, copy 2 Timothy 2:8 on one side. Discuss what it means to remember or to keep one’s mind on Jesus Christ. On the other side of the leaf, ask each one to write a prayer of gratitude, thanking God for the ways Jesus helps them. Gather the prayers into a bowl or basket, and incorporate each one’s prayer into a closing prayer. Conclude by reading together Psalm 111.

