



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
12 October 2025

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Upon the arrival of his grandmother on his mother's side at the door of his house, the little child remarked, "Oh, I sure am happy to see you." "Now maybe Daddy will do the trick he has been promising us." The grandmother was curious. "What trick is that?" she asked. "I heard him tell Mommy," the little boy answered, "that he would climb the walls if you came to visit." Like the little boy's excitement at the visit of his grandmother—the lepers heard the excitement in the village even from their outcast residence. They had heard talk of the miracle worker Jesus, and they were full of hope at the possibility. Yet they were cautious about approaching the village and of course cautious about approaching the other villagers.

The lepers had learned to stay away from large crowds. They preferred the darkness of caves at the edge of town. Not that they had much choice. It is a horrible disease, leprosy. It begins with little specks on the eyelids and on the palms of the hand. Then it spread over the body. It bleaches the hair white and casts a pale-gray over the skin, crusting it with scales and erupting over it with sores that do not heal. But that is just what happens on the surface. Penetrating the skin the disease, like a moth, eats its way through the network of nerves woven throughout the tissue of the body. Soon the body becomes numb to its senses, numbed to both pleasure and pain. A toe can break, and it will register no pain. And sensing no pain, the leper will continue walking, only to worsen the break and quicken the infection. One by one the body parts of the leper suffer their fate against the hard edges of daily living.

And if the physical stigma of the disease isn't enough, the rabbis attach a moral stigma to it as well. They believe it to be a direct punishment of God on the backs of the sinful. For them, leprosy is a visual symbol of moral decay. It begins with a speck that slowly but surely destroys the individual. Old Testament regulations require the leper's outer garment to be torn, the hair unkempt, and the face partially covered. They dress as mourners going to a burial service - their own burial service. And they must call out to those they pass on the way, "Unclean!" An announcement both of their physical and moral death. Rules state that the leper must keep at least six feet away when he passes. And as they pass they are shunned. Little children run from them. Older ones move them along with stones and sharp, judgmental remarks. Adults walk on the other side of the street, mutter a prayer for them under their breath, shake their heads in disgust, or simply look the other way. They live not only with the horror of the disease but also with its shame and guilt.

There is no cure for these men. They are forced to live outside the walls of the city, shuffled off to a colony. There, on the edges of humanity, they are sentenced to live out their days. Again, another symbol. This time of their separation from God. At the colony, food is



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lowered to the entrance of his cave, a cave crowded with the miserable and the hopeless. Then those who brought the food scurry away like frightened mice. The leper's life is one of isolation even in the midst of the colony. Like the disease, the isolation progresses gradually but completely. First their peripheral friends drop out of sight. Then their closer circle of friends shrinks, until at last, they are left with only a tiny center of immediate family. And, one by one, even they stop coming by so often. All that is left is the company of the other lepers and the comfort of the darkness of the caves. Yet the cave is a symbol too - symbol of loneliness, a symbol of cold shoulders and the faint echoed memories of friendship and love. There the lepers live. Without love. Without hope. Without the simple joys and dignities of life: no smiles, no greetings, no shopping at the market, no laughter, no work, no gathering with family and friends, not even an opportunity to worship. All these opportunities are barred from the lepers.

We are far removed from understanding the leper's despair. The last of the quarantine rules around leprosy disappeared from the United States in 1969 when the state of Hawaii finished with the last laws of quarantine with the onset of drugs to essentially wipe out the disease. But even there – less than 56 years ago – the stigma of isolation was well known.

How long has it been since someone has shaken their hands, patted their backs, put their arms around any one of them. Who was the last to rub their shoulders, hug them, stroke their hair, touch their cheek, wipe a tear, or kiss them on the forehead? These are the ten who hear of the buzz in town. The buzz about Jesus. The one claiming to be the Son of God. The one who heals the sick, makes the lame walk, and opens the eyes of the blind. They greet Jesus as he enters the village. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" And when Jesus sees them, he speaks to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. The Scriptures tell us.

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrates himself at Jesus' feet and thanks him. A Samaritan no less. Then Jesus asks the question, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And then Jesus said to the one who turned back, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

This is the promise made real. This is the good news come alive. This is Jesus as healer, comforter, worker of miracles. And the leper who turns back. Who is he? A foreigner. Not even one of God's chosen people and yet Jesus heals him without question. This leper is the one out of every one hundred who turns back to thank God for the miracle, the healing, the answered prayer. This is the leper who has his faith renewed and his spirit lifted by the answer to a prayer and a last plea for help. And the other nine, where are they? It is the echo of Jesus' own words. Where are the nine? Where are those who have been pulled away from the edge of death?



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Where are the nine who are whole again? Who is living again? Where are those who have been given so much and yet give so little in return? Where are the ones who do not turn back? And as we stop in our reading of this Scripture today - we ask the question of ourselves. Who are we? Are we the one who turns back, or the part of the nine who continue on their way? The one who returns is full of thanksgiving and praise for Jesus. The other nine - we do not know if they are thankful or not - I believe that they are. We do not know if they are faithful or not - I would believe they have to be to a point. On the speaking of one man, on hearing the voice of Jesus, the other nine left to run to the rabbi of the nearest synagogue. They had to believe in something - to consider themselves healed of their leprosy with just the words of one man.

And yet the one who turns back - Jesus is pleased with this child of God. And Luke makes mention of the attitude of Jesus toward this one. Jesus is pleased that he remembers to return and to offer thanks and praise not to Jesus but to God. Jesus is pleased because the one who turns back offers glory to God. And Jesus speaks words of hope to this one who turns back - "Get up and go, your faith has made you well." For all of those faithful people who are mentioned in Scripture, the leper is mentioned not by name but by his faith and by his loneliness as one who kept his distance. And now forever, he will be known as the one who turns back to offer glory to God at the feet of Jesus. And this offering brings a smile to the face of Jesus. No longer is Jesus concerned about the return of the other nine. For this one who turns back - Jesus is reminded of the will of his father in heaven. For this one who turns back - Jesus is reminded of his purpose and reason - to bring glory to his father in heaven. And in the turning back of this one lost soul now found - Jesus has brought glory to his father in heaven.

It is the same for you and me. We are always to be constantly in prayer to and in praise of God. When God acts in our lives we are given the opportunity to bring glory to God through our witness of God's power and presence - but more importantly we are given the opportunity to offer our praise and thanks to God - not that others might see us but that our praise and thanksgiving might give glory to God - which is a part of our calling as the people of God. When we turn back to offer praise and thanksgiving - God is glorified and it is in that glory that God's power and presence is made known in the lives of those who believe. It is impossible to thank God enough for what God has done, is doing, and will do in our lives. We can never hope to offer enough. And that usually pushes us to keep our distance from God. However, what we can offer, when we turn back, are ourselves as witnesses to God's power and presence and in our turning back - we offer God the glory. Amen.