

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Thanksgiving Service

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Text: Luke 17:11-19

Title: "Shoes and Blackberries"

(Before reading the scripture gather 10 "lepers" at the front. The lepers might be a collection of folks of different ages – including at least one child. Or, they might come from a single class of older children, youth, or adults. As the lepers come forward pose each one handing them, even wrapping them in props that describe the life of lepers. You will need several big cloth bandages to wrap around limbs.

1. Instruct one to wrap up an arm as you describe the open, oozing sores.
2. Tie a bandage around the head of another, explaining that the sores could show up anywhere, even on your head.
3. Put a sticky bandage across another's nose and imagine what it would feel like if you had sores right in the middle of your face.
4. Wrap a bandage vertically around one's head covering the ears noting that sometimes the sores on ones ears made the ears fall off completely.
5. Have another make a fist and wrapped it up in a bandage as you point out that fingers often got so diseased that they fell off.
6. Hand another a crutch or cane and bend one leg up so their toe just balances on the floor, noting that toes also fell off.
7. Tell one to put his/her hands out in the stay away gesture telling how contagious leprosy is and noting that people had to live away from town, often in caves.
8. Get another down on knees with hands outstretched to beg explaining that the only way they could get food was for people to bring it to them. Note that some families regularly brought food to a family member living with the lepers, but others had to beg from passers-by.
9. Throw a larger raggedly piece of cloth around the shoulders of another pointing out that they were also dependent on others to bring them clothes which meant they were often wearing dirty ragged clothes.

10. Sit one down on the floor facing away from everyone with head in hands looking down. Imagine how discouraged and sad one would get living this way, often for years, with no hope of getting better.

Pose the lepers then read the story, thank the lepers, and send them back to their seats.)

Can you imagine the sight of a leper? Seeing a person suffering from the disease might be like seeing someone you knew had Ebola, except the latter will kill you a lot sooner. Leprosy takes much longer to take a life. In the first century the label included people who contracted a variety of skin ailments ranging from psoriasis to Hansen's disease, which is the disease we typically associate with leprosy. Digits losing circulation, turning white and eventually dropping off. Can you imagine the site of this group of 10? I can see them. They remind me of the father of Robert the Bruce in Mel Gibson's movie, "Braveheart", the story depicting the life of William Wallace. He's a man whose hands are wrapped in rags, torn in strips from dingy cloth. His head covered in an unwashed hood, a makeshift scarf around the neck covering sickly flesh. The cheeks a dull gray. Every time Robert the Bruce walks into the isolated room to talk with his father, I wince at the sight of him. You know there must be a stench. When I think of these 10 shouting to Jesus, he's the one I see. Separated from society. A revulsion.

Have you seen the man lying on the steam grate in the early spring trying to keep warm? No home. No place to go. But he manages to scrape enough money together to grab a smoke and a bottle of cheap wine now and again. People think, "If he'd save his money instead of spending it on that kind of thing, he could have a home." When you walk by him on the street, your nose tells you he's near. Don't even have to look. Don't even have to get very close to smell the stench. No way you want him to get near you. He's a leper too.

In our story from Luke, Jesus is making his way toward Jerusalem. There's a purpose to this trip. It's not just a vacation in the mountains toward which he's headed. He's on his way to trial. He's on his way to die.

This is how I see the event. On his way, Jesus walks into a village. People are out and about. Children running in the street, squealing with delight as they chase each other. Women standing near market booths buying the day's meat. The sun high in the sky. He walks past the booths, a child bumps into him. Then he hears voices. As if they were a congregation reciting a unison prayer, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" He searches the streets, looking for the source of the prayer. Then he sees them. A group of 10 down an alley he was about to pass. Out of the way. At a distance. It was the law. As Leviticus has it:

The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp. (Lev. 13:45-46)

They may have tweaked the law a bit by living together. Even the ostracized need human contact. They called them leper colonies, but they respected the community enough to stay away, not wanting anyone else to share their fate.

Jesus saw them. Sick. Wrapped in torn rags like Robert the Bruce's father. A sort of

living mummy. That unmistakable stench. And without much ado, he says simply, “Go to the Temple and show yourselves to the priest.” It was also the law that for a leper to be allowed to return to the community, to family, a priest had to declare them healed, clean.

Now these lepers had heard about his miraculous healings, which is why they were there. Without a word they turn as a group and begin the trip to the priest. And somehow, some way, a medically unverifiable healing took place. I’m not going to try to rationalize it. It’s a mystery. Some healings are simply mysteries. Even medical professionals have witnessed such things. It shouldn’t have happened. It couldn’t have happened but somehow, it did. Doesn’t happen for everybody. That too is a mystery for which there is no answer.

For these 10 it did. The healing power of God brought wholeness again. They could see and live with families again, go to the mall again, be welcomed by and worship with the congregation again. Nine of the ten keep moving, headed to do those things from which they’ve been deprived. One – a stranger, a foreigner, a Samaritan – turns around and in his joy runs to Jesus to offer praise and thanksgiving for the gift he’s received. Not only with his voice but with his body as he lay flat on the ground before Jesus. The ultimate physical act of humility. Humbling to watch.

I wonder as I see in my mind’s eye this healed man lying before Jesus overwhelmed with gratitude for the gift he’s received, shouting over and over again, “Thank you God! Thanks be to you, O God!” I wonder: how long has it been since I’ve felt that kind of gratitude? Have I ever? Have you? Am I like the nine who receives a gift from God and keeps going on my merry way, not turning back, almost as if I deserve it or maybe just so caught up and giddy I just don’t think about it. There is no one really to thank. The gift is still given. It’s not retracted for the nine. Expressing gratitude is not required. God doesn’t force us to be grateful. Being grateful is a gift to God, a recognition that the source of our gifts is God.

You might say, “Well, that may be true for a miraculously cured leper. The gift is obvious and immediate, but I’ve never had that kind of experience. God hasn’t bestowed that kind of obvious, immediate gift on me. Why should I be grateful to God?” Or maybe your question is, “Why don’t I feel grateful to God?”

Bishop Will Willimon, shared some insightful thoughts in a sermon.

Jesus continues to... desire and design opportunities where he can encounter a myriad of people in a variety of places—people like you and me. Furthermore, Jesus continues to give great gifts—gifts of healing, acceptance, and joy. Some of us have experienced a statistically defying, medical cure. All of us have experienced minor medical healings whether it be the ending of a headache or a scab forming over an open wound. Some of us have experienced deep depression. All of us have walked through dark, painful nights. Some of us have experienced broken bones and bodies. All of us have experienced broken hearts. Some of us have been ostracized by society –pushed to the outskirts because of the color of our skin, the amount of our paycheck or our sexual orientation. All of us have been teased and put down. All of us, every single person in this room, have been healed. We have been found. We have been touched. We have encountered the living Christ. We have

received his mercy and grace. We have been cleansed.

Through Jesus, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. No response is required. No debt is owed. We can choose to go on our way like the other nine, and many of us do. We can also choose to be like the Samaritan who returned. We can respond to God's faithfulness with praise and thanksgiving. (Pulpit Resource, Vol. 32, No. 4, October, November, December 2004)

Being grateful is not like being short or tall, young or old. There are some conditions over which we have no control. Being grateful has to do with seeing. It's recognizing that God is the source of all our gifts. "Why don't I feel grateful to God?" may in part be answered by another question written by Biblical scholar, Alan Culpepper: "Are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay and for which we often fail to be grateful? Here is a barometer of spiritual health: although gratitude is not synonymous with faith, neither response to God can be separated from the other."

How do we express gratitude to God? By being grateful. Thanksgiving begins with noticing what is all around you. It is easy to overlook our blessings. You may remember the story of Moses who when shepherding on Mt. Sinai came across the burning bush. He could have shrugged his shoulders and kept on moving but something in him decided to stop and look and somehow he met God there as he took off his sandals standing on holy ground. Of this opportunity to notice the holy presence of God, Elizabeth Barret Browning wrote a poem:

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."
— [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#)

Ten were healed. Nine kept moving. One returned. Are you the one?