

Sunday, October 10, 2010 – The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 17:11-19 + 20

Just Do It!

“On his way to Jerusalem Jesus was passing along between Samaria and Galilee.” Luke 17:11. To understand the dynamic of what is happening here I need to provide a little background. Samaria occupied the same position in relationship to Galilee and Judah as the West Bank does today in relationship to Israel. The ancestors of the Samaritans were the Ten Tribes of Northern Israel with their capital at Samaria. After the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, there was an infusion of other captive peoples. They became a nominally “mixed race”. They worshiped YHWA and held to the Torah, but because they did not worship at the Temple in Jerusalem and because they were not “pure” in lineage and race, they were looked down upon by the Jews. They were considered unclean, unacceptable to God. Because Samaritans were considered “unclean” a Jew would never associate with a Samaritan or pass through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem.

Leprosy was a highly contagious skin disease. A person diagnosed with leprosy was considered unclean and denied all normal human contact. They were truly on the outside looking in. The fact that these Jews and Samaritans were dependent on each other for companionship showed the depth of their despair.

This is not a story about “a day in the lives of ten lepers”. This is the story of each one of us at some point in every one of our lives. It is the story of every man and every woman. Who of us has not experienced a point of isolation or despair, a sense of pain or loss? This is about the loss of a job or a loss of a loved one. This is when the doctor says the lump is cancer even if there is hope of treatment. This is a feeling of being different, of being looked down on or not quite meeting all of the expectations. It is the time when the last thing in the world that you need is to be alone.

As Jesus was entering a village, ten lepers cried out to him, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” Luke 17:13. They needed someone to see them as human beings, someone to care. Jesus’ response speaks volumes. There is nothing the men were required to do or believe. Jesus said, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” Luke 17:14. Poverty and sickness were seen as a sign of God’s rejection. If a person was sick it was because they had sinned against God and were being punished. It is unfortunate that we are still being plagued by this same kind of foolishness today. Not only is this true of both natural and manmade disasters, but it also seems to be the case in a variety of difficulties that befall us. There is always some fool ready to offer God’s judgment. Not only do people have to suffer the pain or loss itself, they are also assured that God is out to get them. In the case of the ten lepers, this is why the priests were involved. If a person was healed, their relationship by God was restored. Once they had shown themselves to the priests, they would be declared clean and readmitted into society. In one very quick act Jesus had given the men their lives back.

Jesus was not drawing attention to himself or his actions. He was simply doing what was right in the lives of the people he encountered.

Now things start to get interesting. “Then of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.” Luke 17:15-16. All of the men were healed. There was nothing they had to do to be healed, there was nothing they were required to do in response. They were healed by a gracious act of God. When we cry out in our pain and loss, God is with us. There is nothing that we must do in order to be assured of God’s caring presence. It is amazing the parallel between the response of the Samaritan leper and Jesus’ call to all of his listeners to respond to the Gospel. Throughout the Gospels Jesus proclaims that God is present here and now and that we are each called upon to “repent” and “believe” in the Gospel. To repent is to turn around. When the Samaritan leper saw that his life had been restored, he turned around to encounter the presence of God that he had experienced in Jesus. This is not simply a matter of thanking Jesus that his health had been restored. He believed, he trusted that his life had been brought into a new relationship with God. The Samaritan leper was seen as nothing in the eyes of the people he encountered. Jesus by his action had assured the man that he was accepted and valued in the eyes of God. This is Gospel. Falling at the feet of Jesus he opened his mind, heart and spirit to God’s presence. God became real for him. Then Jesus said, “Rise and go your way, your faith has made you well.” Luke 17:19. Jesus is talking about much more than the man’s physical health. The man was brought into a living relationship with God. He was once again able to embrace his family, experience the satisfaction of hard work. His dignity was restored.

I feel that it is unfortunate that the everyday experience of our Christian faith is put into a reward / punishment model. We live a certain way in order to receive our future reward or escape a future punishment. Why do we name the name Christian and strive to follow the example of Jesus? Too often it is presented as what we must do in order to receive our reward. I was once challenged by someone who asked, “What if you found out tomorrow that heaven and hell did not exist? Would I continue to live as a Christian according to the example of Jesus?” To me it is a no brainer. Absolutely! Living in relationship with God according to the compassionate way of Jesus is the best and most meaningful way for me or any person to live. To be able to live each day knowing that I am accepted and valued by God and that God is with me stands head and shoulders above anything else that is offered in this world. I still have my anxieties, frustrations, pain and loss, but I am never alone. God is with me.

Jesus told the man to go on his way, to return to his village, his family, his work, his life. But once his eyes had been opened to the presence of God, he would never again be the same. This story does not end at the nineteenth verse. Luke continues. Remember, the kingdom of God was the Hebrew’s way of speaking of the presence of God.

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“Being asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” Luke 17:20. God is with us. With that assurance God sends us out into the world to do what is right in living each day. To borrow a phrase, “Just do it!” Amen.

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