

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity: Luke 17:11–18

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We've been doing a lot of faith talk the past few weeks. Faith that forgives. Faith that moves mulberry trees. Faith that serves without boasting or bookkeeping. Today we hear about the faith of Ruth, a young widow from Moab, who becomes an Israelite and goes with her mother-in-law Naomi with the words, "where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried." These are beautiful, faithful words of a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law expressing her faith in the God of Israel, a story that ends with Ruth becoming the great-grandmother of David and the ancient ancestor of Jesus.

We have the words of the apostle Paul to his young charge Timothy, Paul's "last will and testament" as he sat in a Roman prison awaiting his certain execution. He knew the time of his death was drawing near, and yet he writes the very hopeful letter to Timothy reminding him of his faith in Christ and encouraging him to fight the good fight and to run the race of faith clear to the finish line.

The danger with all this "faith talk" is that we begin to view faith in transactional terms, as some sort of deal with cut with God, as if we could say, "I believe in You, so now You owe me." You hear this in what is called the "Word/Faith" movement or "Name it and claim it" theology, which says, if you believe God will do something for you, then He will do it. If you have faith, then you can expect favors and even miracles from God. If you believe, then whatever you ask for, you're going to get. I'm sure you've heard this. It's wildly popular on television and has been around for decades.

Of course, there is also the opposite. When something bad happens or the doctors can't find a cure or your appeals run out and you wind up an innocent man on death row like the apostle Paul, you begin to doubt. Do I have faith, you wonder? Maybe I don't believe enough. Illness particularly is a test of faith, especially when we pray and we don't get better. We enlist a whole bunch of people to pray, our congregation and a dozen or so others as well, and still nothing seems to work. Didn't we believe? Didn't we ask in faith? What went wrong? People

even talk about “faith healing,” as though healing was a reward for faith. If you have faith you’ll be healed. Oh, you must not have faith, because you’re not getting better. I’m amazed at how many well-intentioned people torment others with that.

Job’s three friends who visited him during his time of suffering did just that. After sitting with their suffering friend for seven days in silence, which was the best thing they did for him, they proceeded to try and analyze why their friend was suffering so much. And in their anxiety over their friend’s suffering, they just made matters worse. “Get right with God, Job, and God will get right with you.” “You must not be believing enough, or God wouldn’t let this happen to you.” “God is trying to tell you something, Job.”

On his way to Jerusalem, where Jesus was going to die and rise for the life of the world, He was met by ten lepers. Leprosy was more than a medical condition, it was a social disease. It turned you into an outcast. It isolated you from your family and friends. You were forbidden to enter the temple courtyard, so you were cut off from worship. When you passed someone on the road, you had to cover your mouth and yell out, “Unclean! Unclean!” and keep as far away from people as possible. People would avoid all contact with you. They’d hide their children from you. The only community you had was your fellow lepers.

Ten lepers stood at a distance calling out to Jesus. They didn’t cry out “Unclean, unclean” as they were supposed to, but they called out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” They sought mercy. Likely healing. They’d likely heard about Jesus and His power to heal. They hoped and prayed He would do the same for them. They believed this much, that Jesus had the power to heal them of their leprosy and return them to their community.

The miracle is unusual. Usually, Jesus would reach out and touch the person, even if they were unclean. He touches the unclean, and they become clean. But this time, Jesus doesn’t even close the gap let alone cross the street. He just shouts back across the road, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” The priests were like the health inspectors who would verify that they were clean and could return to their homes and community. There would be a sacrifice of thanksgiving and a ritual of purification. And they could return home again.

Luke doesn’t tell us how this miracle happened. It appears that as they walked on the road to go to the priests, they began to notice that their skin was cleansed and their leprosy was disappearing. You can only imagine their faces as they looked at each other in amazement. They were probably absolutely giddy with joy, dancing and high-fiving each other over their

good fortune and how lucky they were to have bumped into Jesus that day on the road between Samaria and Galilee. You know what it's like when you get well after being sick for a long time, or the diagnosis you feared turns out to be nothing. It's like rising from the dead, like being born again.

One of them stopped and turned around. Instead of going on with the others, he went back down the road to where Jesus was. This time, he didn't stand at a distance but came right up to Jesus and fell on his face at Jesus' feet and gave thanks. He worshipped. And at this point, we learn that he was a Samaritan. Not only had he been a leper, he was one of those Samaritans. A double loser in the eyes of any respectable Israelite. Only this outsider to Israel, this foreigner, turned to give thanks to Jesus for the healing he had received. Ten out of ten lepers were cleansed. Only one out of ten makes the Jesus connection and returns to worship and give thanks.

And it's to this one that Jesus says, "Rise, and go your way, your faith has made you well." In the Greek text, it says, "your faith has saved you." That's a bit bigger than healing, though salvation certainly includes healing as well. The Samaritan knew whom to trust, not only with his diseases but also with his death. You might say that ten out of ten had faith to be healed, but only one out of ten had faith that saved. And he knew at whose feet that salvation rested. Faith makes the Jesus connection. Your faith has saved you; your Jesus has saved you.

Lots of people are healed every day. Some through the intervention of modern medicine, some by their own immune systems, a few spontaneously or miraculously. Regardless of how that healing comes, it all comes from Jesus, the Source of every healing. Physical healing is not an end in itself. If you stop and think about it, health is a rather dynamic condition that generally skids downhill the older one gets. And while diet and exercise may maintain and even temporarily improve one's health, the number of our days is still known before one of them comes to be. We are born stamped with an expiration date. That is the wages of Sin, the condition we inherited from Adam as children of Adam.

Sin is a leprosy of the soul. It isolates us, renders us unclean before God, its symptoms spread throughout our humanity. Everything we do and touch and say and even think is tainted with Sin. It's like a vast corruption of our software that has also infected our hardware. Body and soul are infected by the virus of Sin and we can't cure ourselves. Were it not for the mercy of God in Jesus, we would be left in isolation, separated from God and isolated from each other.

Jesus became Sin for us. He took up our disease, our uncleanness. He is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. He is the atoning sacrifice, not only for our sin, but for the sin of the world, the whole sin of the whole world. All ten lepers are cleansed. There is not a leper in that bunch that wasn't cleansed, and even the unbelief, or at least the lack of gratitude on the part of nine out of ten did not negate their healing. Jesus didn't send back their leprosy. They went on their way, thanks to Jesus without thanks to Jesus.

In Adam all die, in Christ all are made alive. In Adam humanity fell into Sin and Death, in Christ humanity is brought into forgiveness and life. As far as Adam's sin goes, so far and further, do the perfect life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus go. One leper returns. He repents. He turns on his way to fall down at the feet of Jesus and worship. He happens to be a Samaritan, but that's largely irrelevant. The last will be first. He is not only healed, he is saved. The other nine trusted Jesus for their healing, at least insofar as He was capable of healing. This man trusted Jesus with his life.

What Jesus did for that leper, He does for us. Like Naaman the Syrian general who was cleansed from his leprosy by the word of the prophet and the water of the Jordan, we have been cleansed of the leprosy of our sin by the Name and the water of Baptism. And like that Samaritan, we return to give thanks. We come back to the feet of Jesus to render our thanks and praise to Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. And while we aren't yet "symptom free," the cure has been applied. You have been joined to the death and life of Jesus. Baptism now saves you, not as a washing of dirt from the body, but as a cleansing of Sin from body and soul.

The healing comes finally to us in the resurrection of our bodies on the last day. Then the cleansing will be complete, the leprosy of Sin will be a thing of the past. Then Jesus will say to us what He said to that Samaritan on the road that day. "Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you." Your Jesus has saved you. Baptism now saves you.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 17:11-18 / 13 October 2013", posted 2013-10-13 (<https://htlcms.org/2013/10/luke-1711-18-13-october-2013/>).