

**The Tenth Leper and the Winds of Grace**  
**United Church of Gainesville,**  
**March 22, 2009**  
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**Psalm 42-9-10 Norman Fischer**  
**Luke 17:12-17**

Are you ready for some bible study? I can pretty much guarantee you that in all my years of ministry at UCG I have never preached on this story of Jesus and the Ten Lepers. Some of you may be asking, "Then why is he doing it now?" It's inspired me with a lot of new ideas, but to get to them, I have to get a few details out of the way.

First, I think that the some of the greatest damage to our biblical insight comes from watching too many epic bible films. We get images in our head that we just can't get out, , and they're often wrong. The Jell-O based walls of water the Hebrew slaves passed through in "The Ten Commandments" is one such image. Leprosy is another, especially in films such as "Ben Hur", in which people with leprosy were depicted as frightening, deformed hooded figures reeking of danger.

What the bible calls leprosy is not what we call leprosy, or Hansen's Disease, today. Most modern Greek and Hebrew translations of the bible don't say leprosy any more but instead refer to "people with a terrible skin disease." What we know of today as leprosy is not a skin disease but actually a disease of the peripheral nerves.

Biblically, the Hebrew word for leprosy, "Tsara'ath" was an umbrella for any number of otherwise undiagnosed skin diseases. Leprosy even included mildew on walls, leather and clothing, all of which were considered unclean and in need of purification.

Realize that it wasn't until the twentieth century that we began to understand how diseases were transmitted. Because in ancient times no one could be sure what diseases were communicable and what were not, people with visible skin diseases were considered dangerous, thus unclean and classified as outcasts.

The leprosy of the bible was not necessarily seen as God's punishment for sin. It was viewed as an inexplicable random act of God which had no understandable medical or spiritual cause. You just got it. As the wonderful preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor says, it was not just the lepers' disease that people were afraid of, it was their, "loneliness, their unspeakable fear that no one wanted to catch" (Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, p. 114)

We've had this division in every society, the outsider not to be confused with the insider. They're them. We're us. They're over there. We're over here. That's the leprosy described in the bible, the ultimate symbol of the clear outsider.

Now to the bible story. These ten people with leprosy may have come to Jesus for two reasons. The most obvious is that he is known as a healer. The less obvious is that in certain circles he is an outsider like them. Isaiah chapter 53 describes the Messiah as the suffering servant of God, “despised and rejected by others; a person of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces.” While Jesus may not have had the lepers’ specific disease, the servant of God is one who has and will experience their loneliness and thus one who understands them.

When they hear Jesus is in town, they come and stand at their required distance and shout for mercy.

I like to remind us that we can never know what actually, physically happened in any miracle story. We can think of all the possible explanations. Was there no true disease? Was there a psychosomatic healing? Was it a trick to make Jesus look good? Was it an actual divine intervention changing their physical condition? The answer is always the same – We don’t know and we will never know.

All we can ask is what the miracle means.

The actual healing is interesting. There was no touching; no spitting in the ground and making a mud plaster to smear on them. Jesus simply looked at them and told them to go show themselves to the priests.

So here’s one meaning of the story: One great miracle that anyone can perform is to truly look at someone cast as an outsider as human and worthy to be seen.

I remember that poignant scene in the musical “Chicago” where Amos, the kind-hearted yet ignored and exploited husband of the beautiful Roxie Hart sings. Roxie has left Amos behind as she plows her way to stardom, and Amos, on a blacked out stage sings the lonely song “Cellophane” about being invisible, someone nobody sees.

One level of healing for the people with leprosy is that someone, in this case Jesus, actually sees them.

Not much is made of the details of the healing. We can imagine that on the way to show themselves to the chief priests, one of them pulls up his sleeve, looks at his hand and arm, and realizes he has been healed. Then the others do the same. One, however, turns around to go back to Jesus. The other nine keep moving, afraid that if they stop, they will wake up and discover it was all a dream or that somehow the healing would be taken away.

The miracle is more about the one who turned around than about healing all ten of them. When that one returns to thank him, Jesus permits himself a rare moment of sarcasm. Doing a fake glance to the right and left, pretending to count bodies who weren’t there, Jesus says, “Hey weren’t there ten of you when we started? Where are the other nine?”

Then Jesus adds the extra whammy for anyone getting a little smug. The one who returned was a Samaritan. Samaritans, you may remember were Jews from the North who worshiped God on Mount Gerizim not Mt. Sinai. You know what it's like with rival siblings, the ones who are most alike - UF and FSU, Harvard and Yale, Christians and Muslims - they tend to hate each other. The Judeans of Jerusalem hated the Samaritans.

The gospel writer, Luke likes to expand the sacred community with surprises. He's the only gospel writer to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. He's also the only one to tell this story. He always widens the circle of God's grace to include those we exclude.

The healing message of this story is obvious, even heavy handed. Who are the outsiders whom we exclude and render invisible? Who are the people with the dreaded skin disease in modern society? I'm sure you can make your list. And at some time, all of us have been on the list. Is there anyone here who has not at some time carried some physical or psychic wound on our skin, our faces, our hands, our clothing, or our reputation and not suffered exclusion for it? And is there any one of us who has not also at some time been seen, healed, and welcomed home? Did we then turn around and acknowledge recovery, giving thanks to the source of our healing or did we march on, either oblivious to or taking the source of our healing for granted?

Sometimes we discover who we are not by following the pack to success, but by returning to give thanks.

Here a few of my guesses about the tenth leper part of our lives and society.

First, at the risk of great arrogance and inappropriate pride, we here at UCG are something of the tenth leper. I could name you nine other churches who were founded at the same time we were, each of whom was given their healing, inspiration, marching orders, and denominational funding, and then sent on their way by the United Church of Christ. Nine went their way like any other church. UCG turned around, like the non-conforming leper, recognized that it had been healed to do a ministry unlike any other, and returned thanks by opening its heart to those outside the traditional definition, language, and dogmas of God.

Second, the tenth leper is a part of each of our own personalities. It is the part of us that reacts to an unexpected success by breaking ranks from the ongoing parade of life before taking another step further and saying, "Thank you God for this second chance at life. I never thought this could happen for me."

Third, the tenth leper is the part of us that wakes up one day to do something very concrete to appreciate where we came from. We make a call to an old teacher, friend, mentor or parent who gave us the gift of who we are.

These are the some of the ways we live out the grace of the tenth leper, by being aware and thankful. Miracles happen when we realize we're in a mess, when we find someone we trust and ask for help. But there's one more step. People are healed every day. Only some know where the healing came from, and few acknowledge it with thanks.

I wonder what the tenth leper did next after he thanked Jesus. I like to think that because he was the one who gave thanks, he passed his blessing on to others who were still outcasts. It's interesting to me how many folks who were once the poor, the outliers, the outcasts so easily forget those they left behind. They think they pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps and now want no association with those who still have the bells hanging around their necks and the signs that say "Unclean."

Grace rides on the winds of gratitude that completes the miracle. Anybody can be healed physically, but many who are healed, like the nine who ran to show themselves off to the high priests, are no more caring or loving than they were before their healing. Only those who recognize their second lease on life are truly saved.

How many of us have had that shot fired across the bow of our lives, dodged that scary diagnosis, recovered from the frightening disease, bounced back after a terrible loss, made all kinds of promises to God to live better lives and then never did a dang thing different? It's the final becoming of a new person that makes a coincidence of good fortune into a true miracle.

If the winds of grace are always blowing, as our Lenten bookmark states, but we have to raise the sail, then let's add the miracle of the tenth leper's gratitude to the ways we hoist our sails. Let thankfulness be a constant song of grace, never taking our healings for granted. And then let us make commitment and service the mark of our thanksgiving.

I have one P.S. as a way to make this commitment today. I think it's safe to say that the healing force of God has touched all of us in one way or another through this church. None of us is the same as we would have been without the grace of UCG. There is a great way for us to give thanks to the community that healed us today, which is to find a board, a committee, a volunteer opportunity that affirms the gifts we have been given. Do not leave here without saying your thanks by filling out the Time and Talent form. This is one way to live the miracle of what we have been given.

Prayer – (from Dawna Markova, in Prayers for a Thousand Years, cited in "Melodies of Grace" Lenten meditations collected by Sandy Reimer)

O God "May I, may we not die un-lived lives.

May we choose to inhabit our days to allow our living to open us,  
To make us less afraid, more accessible, to loosen our hearts  
until they become wings, torches, promises."

O healer of souls, "May each of us choose to risk

our significance, to love so that which comes to us as seed,

goes to the next as blossom  
and that which comes to us as  
blossom goes on as fruit.