

"Getting Close to Jesus"

Luke 17:11-19

October 10,2010

20th Sunday After Pentecost

Leprosy was a horrible disease. It was the AIDS of Biblical times. It infected the body and brought hideous disfigurement to the diseased person. Fingers, toes, noses, ears, and other extremities would rot and fall off. Those who had leprosy were required by Mosaic law to live outside of the community – cut off from their fellow Israelites. If, by chance, a leper encountered another human being, he was required by that same law to remain at a great distance and cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” Leprosy was a deadly disease which people feared. It caused isolation and separation.

Sin is a lot like leprosy. It disfigures us before God and brings death. It causes us to stand far off from God in fear and shame. At least, it should. However, many people (including some Christians) do not view sin like a horrible disease, but only a minor flaw. They think that, because God loves everyone, we all look perfectly fine to him. And, in this age of entitlement, who would ever think of standing far off from God, shouting “Unclean!”? We expect good from God because we have a right to it.

Yet, despite all of our efforts to “lighten up” sin and make it more palatable, it still can affect us like a spiritual leprosy, maybe even without us realizing it. When Adam sinned the first sin, his first reaction was to put distance between himself and God by hiding. In doing so, he set a pattern for his descendants.

I’ve noticed this behavior in many people. For example, when a couple begins having a rough time or goes through a divorce, one of the first things they do keep their distance from God by not attending Divine Service. The same goes for people who, for whatever reason, stop attending Divine service. Rather than coming back to the Lord, they find it easier just to maintain their distance. The list of sins that cause people to keep their distance from God could go on and on.

What about you? Maybe you don't have that fear which causes you to keep your distance from God. Usually, when we consider our sins to be small, we feel that we can handle them without feeling fear or keeping our distance. If we do that, we tragically underestimate God's wrath and horribly undervalue our sin.

God is not simply a loving God or overlooks or ignores sin. He is angered by sin and shall wipe it out. Our evaluation of sin as either big or small is simply that: our evaluation. God knows no such distinction. God says in His Holy Word, "The wages of sin – all sin, every sin, big sin, or small sin – is death." It also says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Every last one of us, myself included, shall die because of our sin. Doesn't this sureness of death and the threat of everlasting punishment fill you with fear? It should. Doesn't it make you afraid to come near to a wrathful and punishing God? It should.

The lepers in our story acknowledged their disease and realized their uncleanness before Jesus. They did not presume to rush up to Jesus or grab him and demand healing. They kept their distance out of fear. Out of great humility, they cried out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." There is no denial of the illness or demand for a cure. It was simply a cry for mercy – for Jesus to show love to them in action – by curing their disease.

We, as sinners, are in the same position. We dare not rush up to a holy and righteous God and make any sort of demands. Rather, recognizing our horrible disease of sin and realizing our total spiritual uncleanness before God, we simply cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Show Your love for us in action. Cleanse us from our sin and bring us back into fellowship with you.

How does Jesus react? To see lepers in that day would bring forth feelings of disgust and revulsion. Many would turn and run because of it. Others, like pious Pharisees of the day, would do everything within their powers to avoid lepers, lest they become defiled and contaminated by the disease.

Yet Jesus leprosy does not push Jesus away from these lepers. Jesus speaks words of healing: “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Jesus would grant them healing and the priests would declare it to be so. That was their job according to Mosaic law.

In the same way, sin – as vile and revolting and damnable as it is – does not push Jesus away from us, no matter how far away from Him we are. In fact, Jesus, not only does not shy away from sin, but He comes to take our sin upon Himself, no matter how disgusting it is; no matter how disfigured it has made us.

On the cross, Jesus is the one who, in His great suffering, is disfigured for you, for me, for all people so that we might be cleansed in God’s sight. Jesus is the one who is made so disgusting that His Heavenly Father turns away from Him, causing Jesus to cry out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” All this He does so that we might be acceptable in God’s sight, close to Him, and never forsaken by Him.

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead seals the deal. Sin has been removed. Death has been overcome. Hell has been conquered. The barrier we constructed with our sin has been torn down. God and man are reconciled.

When we, realizing, not only the magnitude of our sin, but also the depth of our sin, feebly stand afar off, pleading for mercy, Jesus is only too happy to provide it. He says, “I forgive you all your sins – great or small; often or infrequent” and then he sends us to the priests – our pastors whose job it is to declare this to be so through the Holy Absolution.

Our story ends with one leper returning in thanksgiving and falling at the feet of Jesus in worship. The distance is gone – even for this foreigner, this Samaritan. We can only imagine the joy of this former leper now cleansed, as he grabs hold of Jesus in profound worship. This former leper and Jesus are close, having been united and knit together through this healing.

Today, some – all too many, in fact – are like the nine out of ten lepers. They miss or ignore this invitation to be close to Jesus. That’s what failing to give thanks is. It’s not failing in an

obligation. It's not failing to adhere to social etiquette. It's missing out on an opportunity to be close to Jesus. We, who are far off, have been brought close to God by Jesus' death which forgave us and by Jesus' resurrection which healed us. Now we are free to thank Him, grab hold of Him, hold him, and to spend every moment being close to the One who gave us such good gifts.

The story about the ten lepers is our story. We are diseased by sin as they were with leprosy. Both they and we have been cleansed and cured, physically and spiritually, by Jesus. The one leper who returns is, by the grace of God, who we are called to be. This Divine Service – this liturgy we take part in – is not religious ritual or a demanding duty. It is Jesus coming close to us in His Word and in His body and blood. It is a liturgy of thanksgiving and praise for our Lord's healing words spoken to us that remove the leprosy of our sin. We are clean, forgiven, holy and free! We are close to our Lord now and will be even closer to Him forever in heaven. What greater joy is there than to receive His gifts and return to Him in thanks. I can't think of anything. Can you? Amen.