

Sermon for Sunday, October 9, 2016

MOVING MOUNTAINS

Our culture, we know, is obsessed with physical beauty. But some of the world's most beautiful people are, in fact, not physically attractive. Some are even disfigured. True beauty is something that is within, and can easily be missed by the eye that fails to probe the set of the soul.

In this morning's scripture reading from the gospel of Luke, we encounter ten lepers who are shunned by society because of their illness and their disfigured appearance. They stick together, and live as a community of outcasts, keeping their distance from the village and from those who enter it. They are pariahs, declared unclean by the priests and therefore unfit to mix with the rest of humanity. They find acceptance and fellowship only among their own kind.

Sometimes the worst thing about disfiguring diseases is the social rejection that accompanies them. Human beings are made to live in community and suffer immeasurably when they cannot. The lonely yearn for companionship; the outcasts dream of acceptance. So outcasts of whatever kind, seek and find one another for support and understanding, and create colonies of the rejected. Together they survive in a society that shuns them, nursing each other's pain with the balm of fellowship. Sadly, sometimes the cause of such rejection is not a disease or a disfigurement, but is just having brown skin, or a birthright from a different country, or even a different sexual orientation.

Such is the case with the ten lepers. They are the rejected, who have found each other for their survival and nurture. But we can be sure they yearned to return to the larger society and dreamed of being normal again, of being declared "clean" by the priest, whose job it was to protect society from the sinful, the odd, the peculiar, and the diseased. We do not know what kind of inner beauty they may have had, because this story is not about the injustice of their lives and their painful rejection. It is instead about their response to their miraculous cure when their fondest dream comes true, when they are healed of their disease and can show their faces again in the society of acceptable people.

Ten lepers, desperate for a cure, approach Jesus as he enters a village. They are Jews, who know the ritual laws of Leviticus, so they keep their distance from this holy man so as not to render him unclean. But they call out to Jesus in hopes that he might have mercy upon them and heal them of their horrendous and isolating affliction. They have a faith born of desperation and hope. They believe Jesus is the Christ. They believe he has the power to heal. In fact, so great is their faith and hope that they take Jesus at his healing word, fully confident that as they follow his instructions and walk toward the synagogue, they shall indeed be healed. And by God they are! But their response to their cure is telling.

Nine of the ten lepers respond to their miraculous healing by continuing on their merry way to show themselves to the village priest. Once the priest declares them clean, they can return to their rightful place in the society of the normal. They go quickly, excited about getting their names

cleared so they are no longer outcasts. And who can blame them? But they give no thought to praising God for their wonderful cure, or stopping to thank Jesus. All they think of is themselves.

Nine lepers are cured of their illness, but they are still diseased. They remain infected by self-interest, the same disease that causes society to reject the different, the odd, the ill, and the peculiar in the first place. We could say the nine are cured, but not healed.

Psalm 26, read this morning, reveals the symptoms of this disease. Paraphrase its message, and it sounds something like this: "Save me, O Lord, for I deserve it. I've trusted you without wavering; I am faithful in all things. Go ahead, test me. I do not associate myself with false people, and I hate evildoers. I exclude the wicked from my life. I am the picture of innocence, and sing praises and songs of thanksgiving to you alone. I walk in integrity; redeem me, and be gracious to me. I've earned it."

When my father died, who was seventy-three going on sixty-two, my mother was angry with God. She thought my father, who had devoted his life in service to God as a faithful Presbyterian minister and as a disciple of Jesus Christ, deserved better. Didn't a life of service earn him anything? Couldn't God have cured him who still had so much to contribute on behalf of God and his Christ? Her grief made her angry and she turned that anger towards God whom she thought had let her down.

The disease of self-interest makes us self-righteous. We think God owes us, that we deserve God's favor. Why? Because we've been faithful. After all, isn't that what God is for? God promised to take care of us, heal our afflictions, reward our faithfulness and be merciful to us when we slip up. To the faithful, God is terribly useful. God helps us get what we want, and helps us feel good about ourselves. Some even argue that faith in God can make you successful, and rich, and help you live longer. With God, they say, you can have it all. This is a disease of the spirit, and in it there is no humility, no sense of grace, no unconditional love, and no stewardship of the blessings of God. There is only self-satisfaction.

It is difficult to believe that a group of lepers would have this disease of the spirit. After all, what did they have to feel self-righteous about? Ah, but they were members of God's chosen people, and as such believed they had a special right to call upon God. God owed them, or so they thought. We can tell by their actions.

One of the ten lepers however, turns back after being healed to praise God and give thanks to Jesus for his miraculous cure. He, though, is a Samaritan, a Jew who lives outside of God's covenant and, according to the Israelites, is ignorant of the Law. So he remains an outcast even after being healed of leprosy. Although cured, he is still an outcast. But he is the one who turns back, repents as it were, bows down before Jesus, and with a loud voice praises the God of his salvation. He is the one who recognizes his new life as a gift of grace, an undeserved opportunity to start again. He is the one, the only one, who realizes that his new life is not in social acceptability, but is in God, in praising God and in serving God. Jesus marvels that a foreigner, an outsider, is the only one to embrace the truth of the gospel. The insiders failed to respond gratefully to the glorious gift they received.

In truth then, only one of the ten lepers is really healed. Only one is saved from the disease of the spirit that infects them, and infects us all. Only one, the Samaritan, is transformed into a new creature who will live eternally in the kingdom of God. Wellness, especially spiritual wellness, requires more than the absence of disease. It requires a transformation of the soul, away from self-interest, to a joyful awareness of the grace and sovereignty of God.

Like so much of the gospel, the message of this story is double-edged. On the one hand, Luke wants to point out how widely the infection of self-interest has spread. Even lepers have it, who despite the miracle of a cure, fail to open their hearts enough to receive the good news of God's redemptive and gracious love. It is a warning to all the insiders of the world, especially to those of us in the church. God is not for our use, nor does God owe us anything for our feeble attempts at righteousness. God is God. God's blessings are gifts of grace. It is we who owe God. God offers to heal us of all our ills. But our spiritual illness will be cured only when we allow ourselves to be swept up by the amazing grace and redemptive love of Jesus Christ. Among the lepers only the Samaritan allowed himself to be so healed. And only to the Samaritan does Jesus say, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well."

Luke also though, wants to say something positive and instructive about faith. Faith is more than confidence and hope in God. It is also joyful response and heartfelt thanksgiving. Faith that acknowledges life as a gift and salvation as undeserved, rejoices in the Lord with loud shouts of praise and with boisterous songs of thanksgiving. Such was the faith of the Samaritan leper. And he was made well, transformed by the grace of God, into a resident of the kingdom of heaven.

Faith is more than confidence and hope, more than belief, more than ritual observance of the rules of religious practice. It is joyous response, unbridled thanksgiving, humble commitment, and grateful recognition and acknowledgement of God's grace. God heals us and saves us, not because we deserve it, nor because we have earned it, and not even because we are faithful followers of Christ. God saves us because God loves us. Only when we recognize this in faith, are we truly saved from ourselves. Only with this faith will Jesus say to us, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well."

PRAYER: Almighty and most loving God, who heals us of our afflictions and remembers our sin no more, help us see our lives as gifts, as blessings from your gracious love, and seeing, may we turn to give you all our thanks and praise. In Christ we ask it. Amen.

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Luke 17:11-19, Psalm 26