

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
Proper 23, Year C, October 13, 2019
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Turn Back to Jesus"
Luke 17:11-19

God: ransom us; heal us; restore us; forgive us [~ Hymn 410]

one of the best ways to understand the Bible is to find a way to place yourself within any particular story; perhaps you could imagine yourself walking up to the Temple in Jerusalem in a procession of people singing one of the Psalms for a high holy day; perhaps you could imagine yourself sitting near Jesus as he told parables and talked about the Kingdom of God; perhaps you could imagine yourself caught up in the sound of the wind- and fire-like Spirit on the Day of Pentecost; but perhaps it would not be so easy to place yourself within our gospel story today about the cleansing of ten lepers

lepers were viewed with utter horror in Biblical times; they were sick unto death with a flesh-consuming illness; people were afraid that if they got anywhere near them they could become infected too; to add insult to injury, they were believed to have deserved their terrible illness because of their sinfulness; and to add even more insult to injury, they were pronounced "unclean" by the religious authorities, so they had no access to the temple, or to synagogues, or to any of the ceremonies and festivals that assured all the other people that they were right with God

lepers were wrong with God in all respects; they were required by religious law (you can read about it in Leviticus) to live apart from all other people, to wear torn clothing, to dishevel their hair, to cover their faces, and to call out loudly everywhere they went, "unclean, unclean" as a warning to others; these signs were similar to the way that people showed mourning for the dead, for lepers were, in all practical purposes, already dead

to find any approximation of their condition and status in our modern world, you'd have to think back about the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, before we came to our current, better understanding about the disease; everything that lepers experienced was applied then to AIDS-infected persons: the sense of horror, the sickness unto death, people's fear of infection by proximity, the

charge of sinfulness, and utter rejection by many religious people and institutions

making that comparison probably makes it even harder for us to imagine ourselves within this gospel story; and yet....; and yet we should be able to place ourselves within it; for truly, we are not so different in our condition; all of us are in that story; and we're not casual bystanders, watching it happen; this story is still taking place now, today, and we are those lepers, you and I

we are those lepers because we are mortal unto death; and we have fallen short again and again of the great hopes that God has dreamed for each and every one of us; we need cleansing from our "blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice; from want of charity; from inordinate and sinful affections; ... and from hardness of heart..."; you may recognize these words from the prayer book's Great Litany (p. 149); and our response in that litany is, "Good Lord, deliver us"

our plea is the same as that of the ten lepers; in worship every Sunday, we cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" though we do not necessarily use those exact words; we come here because we need cleansing; we come here because we need healing; we come here because we have faith that we can be made well; and we are cleansed, through Holy Baptism, through confession and absolution, through prayer and praise, and through Holy Communion; and even if you do not have a strong sense of having fallen short, personally, in your life and in your faith, there is so much we've been given—our life, our health, our wealth, our happiness—for which we need to give thanks more thanks than we probably ever have

but from that point on, after we have been cleansed, or have come to a fuller recognition of our blessings, as we leave church each Sunday, what do we do? do we follow the path of the nine who were cleansed, without making any further recognition of it? or do we take the steps of the one who was cleansed, a foreigner no less, who turned back to Jesus to thank him?

'turning back' is the literal meaning of the word repentance; after encountering God anew each Sunday, then in the week that follows, do we turn back to Jesus, or do we turn back to our own ways? do we turn back to Jesus to thank him, to praise him, and to do it "with a loud voice," so that

others may hear our witness? do we turn back to him so that our lives will show, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the fruits of our repentance?

notice that there is a progression of terms in the gospel story; ten were “made clean,” but only the one who came to a full recognition of his cleansing was actually “healed;” healing involves more than a physical cure; and only when that one went back to Jesus, with full thankfulness to God, was that one made “well;” where are you on this continuum: have you been made clean, have you been healed, have you been made well?

being well is what we all desire; being well means receiving the fullness of healing in body, in mind, in spirit, and in all our relationships: with ourselves, with others, with creation, and with God; being well means the realignment of our life with God’s larger purposes for us; being well means that we don’t fall short, quite as much, of the great hopes that God has dreamed for you and for me; that’s the ultimate kind of wellness we all seek, and the ultimate kind of wellness we all need; and when we do experience that wellness we can say, in the words of the old gospel song, “It is well with my soul, it is well with my soul”