

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, 14 October 2007
St. Paul's Parish, Kent
The Reverend Allen LaMontagne

A sermon based on the Revised Common Lectionary 23C: 2 Kings 5.1-3, 7-15c; Psalm 111; 2 Timothy 2.8-15; Luke 17.11-19

How does God care for us and all God's people in Christ Jesus, his Son, our Lord? In every way, at all times and in all places, all of our selves, in every phase of our lives. All this can be seen in the story we hear in the Gospel today as we look carefully into it.

Leprosy, as we know, is a terrible affliction. It is not a problem in this country as much as in other parts of the world. One website I briefly looked into reported it currently in fifteen countries and territories in Africa, Asia and Latin America, fifteen down from 177 in 1985, which appears to suggest leprosy may not getting worse, and we hope there is continuing improvement globally, especially for those who endure it now.

With God, even in illness, mercy and grace find expression. We know historically that Samaritans and Jews are not compatible. Although related as Hebrews, Samaritans are not Jews and they do not co-mingle in Jesus' day. Bad blood stems from some bitter conflagration between them around the fifth century B.C. when somebody's temple was destroyed by the other... So, reading that "ten lepers approach Jesus" suggests somehow they come to him as a group, as we learn later one of them is a Samaritan, an alien. Can it be that leprosy, a disease which causes lepers to be excluded and isolated from the larger community, is in this case what brings the lepers together, regardless of ethnic or religious identity? Shunned, invisible within the larger community, ordered by law to keep their distance from it, they find themselves compatriates, fellow sufferers, and they come together to Christ. And Jesus sees them and comes to them. How momentous that he does. Little things mean a lot. That the lepers address Jesus as Master is the only time anyone does that other than the disciples. We can infer that in addition to their being healed, or even before they are, they are converted to become followers of Christ by virtue of the way he goes against the grain to treat them as people and be among them.

Go and show yourselves to the priests. That is how those once sick become certifiably OK to return to the larger community. When the priests give you a clean bill of health, you are good to go. So off they go, as ordered by Jesus. No small thing that they go. They believe him enough to turn themselves around and head right into the mouth of judgementalism. They could have hesitated--*will this work? Will I really be well enough? If I show up still sick among the people, in the presence of the priests in the temple no less, this could go badly. It would not be taken lightly.* It's entirely in faith that they go, as Jesus tells them to go. And on their way their bodies improve. Can you imagine the joy they must feel...?

Run... Run...go to the priest. Get the OK--formally. Don't even look back. If I stop, my healing may stop. Run like the wind... Please God, don't let my healing stop, please ... Run.

In case any one thinks the nine are negligent, less grateful than the Samaritan, we need look closer. The nine take the risk to obey the "Master." Doing so, that which they want most of all *happens*--they heal from their grievous affliction. Jesus, the one who effects their healing, sends them to the priests, as is the custom ... *Would you turn around?* I know I would be unlikely to. The nine do what is always done. Even as they experience the miracle of themselves healing, they do what is customary. Jesus himself adheres to the local custom, and the nine stick to the form, too. To do something different just doesn't occur to them. *Turn around and say thank you...now!?* What comes to mind are what I recently heard called the "last seven last words of an Episcopalian," You know them: *"We've never done it that way before."* The Samaritan, on the other hand, may not have such a history with the priests. They may not know him or like him; he has no use for them. He starts to go, so ordered by Jesus, but wait a minute...He begins to think... *"I may be a leper, I may be an ex-leper, a healed one at that, but when I show up in the temple with the priests, I am still a Samaritan. Sick, I am excluded, Well, I am excluded!"*

Now, I don't know if the priests may have ministered to him regardless of his religious affiliation. I don't know for a fact that they would have refused to see him. But something makes him put on the brakes. Whether they see him or not, or if he goes eventually to them or not, is a moot point. The point is, he does something different, right there and then. And he gets Jesus' attention. He goes back to the person in whom acceptance and grace are embodied before him: the Master. Religious certification means little to him in this moment. He knows his flesh is restored to health. He feels well, strong. He prostrates himself before Christ and thanks him deeply. Jesus is impressed, I believe. "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

I think Jesus would say the same to the nine were he to see them return, even after they see the priests. The nine are obedient according to the customs they've lived with during their lives. The Samaritan has not lived in the Jewish community as a Jew, and is not accustomed to their ways. He does what he does *his* way, and Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well."

A tale of two ways, if you will. Jesus judges not one better than the other, although we may be lead to think so. All ten are made clean. One goes one way, the majority go another. All are blessed and loved and healed and sent on their way, to go a good way, not the same way necessarily, but a good and holy way, according to the life given them to lead.

I don't know what it looks like for you to step out of your accustomed way and see something differently, try something differently. But I believe the Holy Spirit grows us into being what God would have us be, and we may not see that as it is happening as clearly as God does, and we may resist what is new. It's OK, God in Christ knows the territory. "Go show yourselves to the priests in modern times may be, "Embrace Rite One, or Two, whatever you prefer. *But don't think yours in the only way, or the rightest*

way, necessarily. Stay the course, yes. If we've died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are *faithless*, he remains faithful--for he cannot deny himself."

In every circumstance, we are his, for he cannot deny himself. The assurance of God's faithfulness in our lives ought to embolden our hearts. President Roosevelt said famously, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." God says, don't even fear *fear*. Fear is something that can keep us from getting hurt. During her time visiting the Diocese of Easton, someone reminded the Presiding Bishop that her husband once publicly described her as "fearless," and asked if she knows herself that way. In words similar to these, she replied that she does not know herself to be fearless. Fearlessness can too easily become recklessness. We don't put our hand in the fire for fear of getting burned. That's a good thing. She strives to be more faithful than fearless. *So ought we.*

There's nothing wrong in the way any of the ten go, that one, a foreigner, goes a different way. In Christ, the two ways apparently work together. *So ought we.* It's all there in the Gospel, from which to learn, and to learn from one another, that we may continually be given to good works, gratefully, in the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.