“What of the Nine?”
+ Pentecost 20, Year C +
Luke 17:11-19

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel lesson for this day.

“They all rolled over and one fell out. There was one in the bed and the last one said, ‘Good Night.’” Funny how those little rhymes from childhood stay with you. What makes them so endearing to a child is that they are always sure they are the one that’s left! When we hear the Gospel lesson about the 10 lepers it is much the same way.

Thank God for the one Samaritan leper who had the decency to praise the Lord face-to-face for His healing power! In his thanks we have a model for our own – even if he represents just 10% of the population we’re quite sure we are him, “Good Night!” But today I’d like to consider with you the other nine who walked or ran away after this curious miracle with the final authoritative stamp of faith being only a one-in-ten shot.

We picture them out in the scorching sun of Palestine; skin seared and scarred with disease, so hideous and repulsive that they were bound together by the BAN – “Unclean! Unclean!” they cry out to the passersby. You can only imagine that down deep their souls felt scorched and hideous and unclean as well. So, why in the world, we ask, when the sun of God shone on them with warm healing power and the sting of stigma went out of their lives along with the leprosy, did nine of those ten soldiers of misfortune now so fortunate, once marred now marvelously whole take off without so much as a “thanks” to Jesus? What of the nine?

One of them was frightened – that’s all. Didn’t understand what had happened and it frightened him. So he looked for someplace to hide while he processed everything. Jesus scared him and he ran.

The second was offended because he had not been required to DO something – something Difficult – before he was healed. This was too easy. He had expected months, maybe years, of fasting and praying and washing and righteous living to earn this kind of boon. He hadn’t done any of that. He hadn’t earned this reward. All his life he’d said, “You get what you pay for. There is no such thing as a free lunch.” In a strange way he was offended by someone so stupid as to give something so precious away for free – so he ran.

The third had realized too late that he didn’t really want to be cleansed. How was he going to live, what was he going to do now that he was whole? Leprosy had defined him for so long he didn’t know who he was. Jesus had taken his identity – so he ran.
Hard to explain why the fourth leper didn’t turn back in thanks. Really, it was a simple reason. In his delirious moment of joy, he forgot. He forgot! That’s all. Like the actor remembering everyone but their spouse when they accept the Academy Award, he forgot. Ever happen to you? Well, he ran.

The fifth leper didn’t remember how to give thanks. He hadn’t thanked anyone for anything in a long time. Something happens to a person who must beg, who is shunned by all of humanity, treated like a dog with mange. Oh, coins were tossed his way but the people always looked superior, grudging, judging his disease like it was something he deserved. Always, always those people expected a “Thank You.” Was that a “thank you for making you feel better about not being the dregs of society?” There wasn’t a sincere “thank you” left in him – not even for Jesus; and he walked slowly away.

The sixth leper was a woman – a mother separated from her family, her children, for eleven years. No hugs, no personal touch in all those years. Finally she could go home so off she ran – like a wild animal released from captivity she had been freed by Jesus. All she wanted was to go home – so she ran from Jesus with only that goal in mind.

The seventh wasn’t all that sure Jesus had anything to do with the healing. He knew the cleansing had taken place but “Why” and “How” were the questions. Certainly he didn’t believe in hocus pocus, magic, miracles – things like that. There had to be a perfectly intelligent explanation for what had happened – some hysteria Jesus’ voice had induced but nothing real. He didn’t return to give Jesus thanks because who thanks a huckster? He was much smarter than that and he left with his intellect intact.

The eighth leper did not return precisely because he DID BELIEVE that Jesus had healed him. That meant the Kingdom of God was here and now and the Messiah had arrived. He was off to live in the Kingdom and enjoy the benefits. So off he ran – no thanks necessary.

What to say about the ninth leper? Tough case – like the other eight number nine was a lot like you and me. He was confused. He knew there was cause for great rejoicing, that he had experienced a cleansing and renewal beyond expectation. Out of the sand, soot and grime he’d been struck with a force mightier than the strongest wind. Like breathing in the ozone after a storm he felt so incredibly alive and his new flesh tingled. He’d been brought up to be polite – to say “Thank You.” He already knew his life would never be the same now that he’d been touched by the Christ, the Son of the Living God, but why didn’t he feel different inside? Inside he still felt dirty and unclean, unworthy and almost violated – like the love of God had just made him realize how unlovable and unworthy he was. He couldn’t get over this stubborn resistance to being loved and healed by God.

Oh yes, he was a “poor miserable sinner” who wasn’t sure even the Son of God could cleanse someone like him – certainly not all at once in one cleansing act. The outward change
would have to do and he would simply lug the rest of his burdens with him a little longer – they were his after all – and he wobbled under their weight as he went down the road.

The tenth – at last! What we do know is that he turned back praising God with a loud voice and fell on his face at Jesus’ feet giving God all thanks and praise. Jesus commended him for his faith saying, “‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”’ Then what? Well, I had someone suggest that he was, after all, human so he probably went home to Samaria, met up with his buddies and went on a 3 day toot!

10 were cleansed – 1 returned – and we don’t know what happened to any of them afterward. Is the point that one returned or that 10 were cleansed? We’ll go with the one Giving Thanks as being the most important as that seems obvious.

What of the nine? Oh, it is much easier to condemn than to investigate human nature and why all of us or any of us behave the way we do. You already know you could be, have been, will in the future look like any one of the 10 descriptions given today. We are, all of us, poor miserable sinners, lepers and outcasts in our own way – none of us deserving the incomprehensible love of our every faithful in forgiving God.

What of the nine? Men, women, children, teens, college students, golden-agers running away, hiding in fear, refusing to believe, offended at what they would call “cheap grace”, so happy they forgot, lost without their leprosy, unable to give thanks ever again, living large in the Kingdom – oh, looking at them is like looking in the mirror! Imagine, people of God, healed, cleansed in one amazing act of grace and gifted faith stuck in a rut while thoroughly liberated by the hand of God – still thoroughly human and thoroughly in bondage to the whim of their will. Where did they go, these nine? What has become of them? Where are they – where are we?

Jesus knows – Jesus knows right where you are – loves you right where you are. It is not written in the text but even as Jesus asks, “Where are the other nine?” He already knows. He knew all along just what would happen.

For they, no, I must say WE are God’s children, too. And if you have a chance this week after the service is over – in the midst of the hubbub of your life consider how long and how hard God seeks after you – how often God heals and restores you – how constantly and miraculously God makes your life work; simply because you are God’s much loved child – loved so much God’s only Son came to die and rise for you and me. Simply because God knows that like at least 90% of the lepers who were ever healed it is almost impossible for people to really believe there is a God up there, out there, in here, who can and does accept us, warts and blisters and wounds and hurts and all. God who comes to us daily, in a kind word, in a shared meal, in a kiss, in the Word given to us and opened in study, in an argument settled, in busy and boring moments and says, “I love you. I forgive you. You are healed – believe it! You are mine – for eternity.” And one in ten times maybe it will be the time you or I stop and say, “Thank You, Lord, for healing me.”
AMEN

Now may the healing power of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, lead us to lives of thankful praise declaring and sharing God’s love, fresh starts, and healing mercy.  AMEN