Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN. The texts for this morning's message are the lessons for this day

"I Walk As Dead Among the Living."
I walk as dead among the living,
A shadow against a backdrop of other shadows.
Slithering from light,
Craving its liberation,
Fearing its touch,
Horrified at what may be revealed.
My teeth are broken, rotted, So I do not smile.
I am among the unacknowledged,
Those seen in a blur who hear the nervous sounds of car doors locking shut at intersections
As I walk past, seeking shelter from the storm of resentment for my intrusion.
I hold no sign promising work for food,
Collecting nothing but discarded cans and sideways glances.
One of the lost, A forgotten soul,
Another grain of sand
Lost to the erosions of chance and time.
I've slept under bridges I fear to cross,
Like fresh road-kill waiting to expire,
A phantom without a discernable face,
A shadow against the backdrop of other shadows,
Slithering from light,
Craving its touch,
Fearing its liberation.
I walk as dead among the living.

These words could well have been written by the group of lepers in our text today: 10 men traveling in a group outside the city gates. We heard in the children’s message about the 18 feet they had to keep away from anyone else. The visual is still strong - remember how far apart that 18 foot distance between us looked? The size of this sanctuary is perfect for the visual – a vast inspiring place. But suppose that space of 18 feet was always there everywhere you went. Suppose you never could get close enough to kiss your grandchildren again, your spouse, your child, your friend. No more hugs. Suppose, like the leper you knew you would have a “hands off” life until death? Imagine the loneliness, the loss, the anguish – how would you keep from despair? 18 feet for those people was quite literally the distance of death. Anyone who came closer to a leper or a dead body than 18 feet was considered impure and unfit to be in the presence of God. That was all the closer the Priest or Levite dare to get to the body of the person attacked on the roadside in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Could they tell from that distance
if he was alive or dead? Perhaps, perhaps not – was it worth the risk of contamination? Umm no…

No wonder the lepers had to wear bells and scream out “Unclean! Unclean!” whenever anyone came near. The risk was too great. Oh, there were exceptions – Naaman, from our first lesson kept his affliction covered and got away with it. Then, as now, it paid to be a celebrity and he had been a successful army commander in battle. But listen to what awaited Joe the Average Leper once his lesions became apparent. His life wouldn’t just change, it would literally end. His family gathered to read the funeral rite, because to them he was dead – socially, immediately, physically, eventually dead. He was evicted from both his home and the entire community. There were no jobs for Joe – only begging. By law Joe had to wear old ragged clothes – tatters that looked like burial clothes in which the corpse would one day rot.

Such was the life of the men who called upon Jesus that day long ago – hopeless, impoverished, terribly, terribly lonely. All they do is cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” and Jesus sends them packing to the priests and on the way they are made well and whole. I’ve had patches of psoriasis disappear in a few days with ultra strong prescription medicine but on the road? On the way? In case you were wondering true leprosy still exists in our world. 200 cases a year are reported in the U.S. all from contamination during foreign travel or by contact with an armadillo (the only non-human carrier of leprosy). It’s treated now with antibiotics. Oh it remains highly contagious – a bacteria in the skin and mucus membranes that affects the nerves. In classic leprosy the nerve endings stop sending messages to the central nervous system to get the help of white blood cells to attack infection. The smallest scratch on an extremity and the flesh begins to rot away.

At the time of Jesus you didn’t have to actually have real leprosy to be sent away as an outcast – any number of less serious skin diseases – psoriasis that I treat with a cream can look like leprosy and at that time gave you the same death sentence. Then once you were with the real lepers…well, it is highly contagious. So, you see, to be made well and whole – all 10 of them at once – what a miracle! What incredible power. What incredible grace.

Astounding, amazing grace was shown to the outcasts – the lowest of the low, the throw-away members of society – and one of them lower still - a Samaritan! That is as outrageous as God showing mercy to the foreigner Naaman – a non-Jew and servant of the hated foreign king.

So it is with all of God’s mercy and grace. It always comes to the low and the outcast – to sinners like you and me. People who do not deserve the salvation Christ freely gives in the gift of faith in the water and word of baptism. All of us sin-sick souls wandering as the living dead in the shrouds of what would be eternal death until Christ finds us and redeems us. God has heard our cries and sent us the Savior He promised. God is here with us in Word, in Sacrament, in the fellowship of believers to tell us we are whole in Him, we have a purpose in life – a life lived in thanksgiving for the salvation, the life eternal we are given and, most wonderfully and unexpectedly we are loved. We are no longer separated from God and from each other. We can kiss and hug and laugh and cry, and mourn, and cheer one another on as we journey toward heaven.
But how should we give thanks? We don’t know how the 9 gave thanks that day – and I’m sure they did tell the priests and their families about Jesus – even if they didn’t go back to thank Him personally. But the only one we can reflect upon is the Samaritan. He was the stranger in his group, to be sure. Samaritans were half-caste outcasts in the Jewish society. Their religion was a mixture of Jewish beliefs and Babylonian myths. The people themselves were a mixture of local tribes and foreigners, as well. Samaritans were neither fish nor fowl. They were looked down upon and quite literally spit upon, just for being Samaritans. There is no doubt this was the most despised member of the troupe – perhaps the others let him stay in their company because his family still left him food or gave him money that he shared with the only companions he could find. We don’t really know.

So where did the Samaritan leper acquire authentic gratitude, do you think? Well the simple answer is that with the healing of his body, with the miracle he was given, suddenly he had reason to be thankful. The others were headed to the temple - to show the priests that they were clean, and perhaps to thank God there, but the Samaritan found God where right where Jesus was. He saw the source of his healing in Jesus though he hadn't had the pure word of the Law and the Prophets to prepare him. He looked to Jesus and by faith he knew Whom to thank and how to thank Him.

Notice that v. 16 gives us the posture of thanksgiving that this Samaritan leper took. It says, “He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.” Prostration – I’ve only seen it done in plays and movies about religious postulants: Joseph Fiennes as Martin Luther, Audrey Hepburn in The Nun’s Story. It’s lying down flat with your body in the shape of a cross – totally humble, totally surrendered, pledging total service, obedience, loyalty, and love.

When we rise, redeemed and renewed from the waters of baptism we do not live perfect lives – many people who are raised in the faith, faithful as children – even become confirmed don’t understand what God has done for them in the gift of faith more fully until an “Aha” moment where a new awareness of God’s grace gives them new eyes to see themselves as loved and forgiven and look out to see others who are lost and in need. That doesn’t mean that God hasn’t been at work in their lives until then – just that they were unaware – and now they are aware enough to give thanks, rejoice and share the Good News of Jesus as Savior and Lord.

One of the images for preaching for this particular text made a striking connection between the prostrate form of the Samaritan leper and Jesus. It pointed out that on the cross Jesus was stretched out, prostrated on the cross, for the sins of the whole world – for all the lost and lonely outcasts who will ever look to Him in faith and live. As we Walk as Living Among the Dead may others see Christ in us so they might look to Him in faith and live now and eternally. AMEN

Now may our almighty and merciful God whose bountiful goodness fills all creation, keep us in His grace, that we may with grateful hearts and willing hands accomplish all that He has called us to do.