

Nine Lepers and the Worst of the Worst
Leviticus 13-14
Luke 17:11-19

17:11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

17:12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance,

17:13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

17:14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.

17:15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

17:16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

17:17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"

17:18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

17:19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

There were nine lepers . . . One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. See I counted them. Nine lepers.

What? Don't sit in your pew with that smug smile on your face and accuse me of being wrong. Why, I haven't been wrong in the last 30 yearrrrs-----seconds.

I'm sure of it. There were nine lepers . . .

I said to quit arguing with me.-----You must be one of those people who likes to argue. Always looking for a fight, are you?

I'll say it again. There were nine lepers . . . Yes, I know the text says there were ten lepers. And yes, I know the difference between nine and ten. Do you think I went to Moo College or something? (Alright I'll admit State beating Carolina has got me in a bad mood.)

But back to the nine/ (slash) ten lepers. It's true that the text says there were ten lepers. Uno, dos, tres, cuarto, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez. I said it in Spanish. Are you happy now? Yes, Luke 17:12 makes it as plain as day that there were ten lepers. But if you don't realize there were also nine lepers I think you miss a boatload of what is going on in the text, a boatload of what Jesus is saying, and a boatload of what Jesus is doing. And if you are counting, that's missing three boatloads.

Permit me to explain. Be patient and allow me to develop my argument.

One thing that might be helpful for your understanding is to remember, and I am aware this is asking a lot of us who have trouble remembering yesterday----but it would be helpful if you could remember eating lunch in the high school cafeteria. It's got to be high school. It can't be elementary school when you had to sit with your teacher and your class. It has to be a time when you got to choose----got to choose with whom you were going to sit. Visualize your high school

cafeteria. See the cliques. See the groups. See who was in each of the groups and who was out of each of the groups. Who liked who and who didn't like who. All played out in the high school cafeteria. Am I telling the truth?

So I'm saying there were nine lepers and they were like the worst group of the so-called worst people in your high school cafeteria. Do you see the nine lepers over there? They are huddled up together. They are a pretty sore sight for one's eyes, aren't they? Dirty, unkept, sickly looking, skinny as a rail.

Nine lepers separated from, set-apart from, isolated from the rest of society. Go on look at them. Don't turn your head the other way. You may not want to deal with them, but there they are. They are not going away. You may wish they did not exist. You may wish they were never born. You may even wish they were dead. You may wish all this because you are a big Bible believer. You may wish this because you have memorized the book of Leviticus and you know it frontwards, forwards and backwards and you are certain, absolutely certain that the lepers are a great danger to the rest of society. According to you and your Bible and the book of Leviticus lepers are to be feared, loathed, abhorred. They are an abomination.

If you want to understand these nine lepers, if you are going to be able to walk a day in their sandals, you've got to know the politics of the high school cafeteria and you've got to know Leviticus 13 and 14.

Have you read Leviticus 13 and 14 lately? That's what I thought. It hasn't been on your top ten list of things to read, but we've got to take the time to read it. So turn in your Bible to Leviticus 13.

(Read Leviticus 13 and 14.)

Are you starting to understand what it meant to be a leper? Do you understand that if you touched a leper, if you came into contact with someone who was unclean you yourself became unclean? And are you aware that unclean people were not allowed into the temple? Do you understand all the ramifications of being considered unclean in ancient Israel?

Sadly, I have to ask this. Do you know what it is like to be treated as unclean by the modern Church?-----Do you know what it is like to be treated as unclean by your mother or father or brothers or sisters, your family of origin? Do you know what it is like to be treated as unclean by co-workers? Do you know what it is like to be treated as unclean by society, by its laws and institutions? Have you ever been dropped like a hot potato, treated like public enemy number 1? Are you lonely, in part, to a great extent, because of societal rejection?

Nine lepers. Maybe, unfortunately, regrettably, I'm sorry to say, maybe you are a modern leper.

Nine lepers separated from society. It's a sad story, but their story is not---is not the saddest story of all. There is another leper, leper number ten. Not only is he separated from society, he also is separated from the other nine lepers. He, you see, is the worst of the worst. Not only does he have leprosy, he also is a Samaritan, a foreigner, a dirty, low down, good for nothing

Samaritan. He is looked down on by everybody, including the nine Jewish lepers. So in the high school cafeteria he sits by himself in the corner. No one with whom to talk. No one to listen to.

What is it “Three Dog Night” said in their song? One is the loneliest number.

That song could have been written by the Samaritan leper.

You see, it’s one thing to suffer, but it’s another thing to suffer alone. And that’s why we support RAIN, Regional Aids Interfaith Network. We support RAIN because no one, no one should have to live with AIDS, suffer from AIDS, alone.

The worst of the worst. The bottom of the barrel. The dreg, the scum, the filth, the rubbish, the muck. The Samaritan leper. He had two things, two major things going against him. He was a Samaritan and he was a leper.

Ever felt like you had two major marks going against you? Ever felt like what you had going against you was so big, so mammoth, so enormous, so overwhelming there was no way you were going to see the light of day?

So we are not surprised-----we are not surprised when we read that as Jesus entered their village they stood at a distance. They didn’t run to Jesus. They didn’t gather around him. They wanted to, but they didn’t think they could. They assumed Jesus was like everyone else. They assumed Jesus considered them unclean. They assumed Jesus would not want to have anything to do with them. They assumed Jesus believed Leviticus 13 and 14. But Jesus didn’t believe all the Bible of his day. That’s right, Jesus didn’t believe all the Bible of his day. I know that upsets some Christians today to learn this revelation. I am aware that hearing this upsets, makes furious, enrages the religious leaders of our day, the religious establishment because questioning the Bible opens the door to questioning them. Are you following what I’m saying?

But the truth is the truth. And the truth must be told. Jesus did not----Jesus did not believe Leviticus 13 and 14. Heck, he didn’t believe much, if any, of Leviticus. Jesus not only associated with lepers he associated with menstruating women or females with hemorrhaging problems. Jesus associated with all kinds of people removed from the temple because of all kinds of conditions. And in doing so Jesus rejected some of the Bible. He rejected some of the Bible but he did not—and I thank God for this---he did not---he did not reject the lepers, not the nine Israeli lepers, not even the single Samaritan leper. The whole world might have rejected them. The temple might have rejected them. Their synagogue might have rejected them. Their father and mother and brothers and sisters may have rejected them. The people back home might have rejected them. Their co-workers might have rejected them. But not Jesus. Thank God, Jesus did not reject them.

I’m not trying to tell you what to do but you might say hallelujah.

I’m not trying to tell you what to do but you might want to say, “Thank you Jesus.” A million thank you’s.

Say hallelujah and say a million thank you's because Jesus told them to go to the priest. Be careful here. He didn't say, "Go to the priest and on the way I'm going to heal you." No, he said "Go to the priest" which blew their minds, which shocked them, which stunned them because they still had leprosy and anybody who knew the Bible knew you don't go to a priest unless you were clean. You don't go to the temple if you have leprosy.

And the mind of the Samaritan leper was extremely blown. Jesus expecting a Samaritan to be welcomed by a priest, welcomed at the temple. That would be like John Kerry being warmly welcomed at the Republican National Convention or George Bush being welcomed at the Democratic National Convention. Go to the priest? Get out of here. No way.

But yes way. Yes way! Jesus said go and as irrational as it was, as ridiculous as it was, as absurd as it was, they all went, all ten of them, every last one of them. Only I imagine the nine went together and the Samaritan hung back. Going, just not exactly with them. He had to hang back. He was a Samaritan.

Somewhere along the road to Jerusalem, somewhere along the road to the Temple, the Samaritan stopped. That somewhere was the point at which he was healed. He stopped at that point dead in his tracks. I guess I should say he stopped alive in his tracks. For that's how he felt. For the first time in a long time he felt alive.

Have you felt alive, fully alive recently?

Have you experienced joy like never before, much needed joy?

Have you experienced healing?

Has someone done something so great for you that you personally had to tell them "thank you"?

The other nine kept going to the priest. That they didn't come back to Jesus wasn't, and don't miss this, it wasn't that they weren't grateful people. They were just doing what the Bible told them to do. Don't miss that! The Bible indicated that if you want a clean bill of health the only place to get it was at the temple from the priest.

But the Samaritan didn't follow the Bible. No, he turned around and went to Jesus. And that's who I suggest you and I go to, to Jesus. Don't ever let any religious institution put you in the gutter and keep you in the gutter. Don't ever let the steeples convince you are unclean when you aren't unclean. Don't ever put your faith and trust in any person or institution that is not like Jesus. Like the Samaritan leper take your cues from Jesus.

You see, this text is not---is not what the steeples say it is about. I am positive that in churches this morning that if this lectionary text from Luke is being preached what is being preached is a nice little, harmless, wipe your nose sermon about the importance of saying thank you, about the importance of gratitude. Now we all need to say thank you more, like thank you Pastor for that wonderful sermon, we all need to say thank you more, but this text is not---is not about saying thank you. Ever noticed how the safe sermons are the ones getting preached in churches today?

The text is not about saying thank you. It's about a Jesus who didn't believe Leviticus 13 and 14, a Jesus who healed lepers. And it's about a Samaritan leper, someone who everyone thought was the worst of the worst and Jesus said, "No, he's not the worst of the worst. You've got it wrong. You've got it very wrong. Actually, he, more than most, is a person of faith. He, not the priest at the temple, he, a Samaritan, he, a Samaritan leper, is a person of God."

So don't listen to the Church to tell you who's in and out. It seems the Church that thinks they've got it all figured out has actually got it all backwards. Imagine that. No, listen to Jesus, the Jesus who treats you as the child of God you are.

Listen to me. You may never be welcome in the traditional steeples. I wouldn't hold my breath. The steeples may never get it, may never catch on, may continue to live and preach ignorance. In your lifetime you may never be truly and fully welcomed in the traditional steeples, but thank God Jesus will always welcome you.

For that, you may want to tell Jesus thank you.

Thank you Jesus. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.