Sermon | Proper 23C

TEXT: Luke 17:11—19

9 October 2016

Holy

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Dear saints,

[It’s good to be back. I missed you. I will tell you, the one thing that will be different about this sermon from last week is there will be no signing. I want to thank Pr. Bush and Pr. Muller for filling in. We keep Pr. Bush in our prayers as he travels to Macau to serve as one of the Lord’s missionaries.]

This morning we are challenged with the text of the Healing of the Ten Lepers from Luke 17. And the story goes like this. Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem. And he is passing through the region of Galilee and Samaria. And his disciples are with him, and a large crowd. And he’s teaching and he’s healing. And as they’re going into a certain village, ten lepers come out to meet him. And from a great distance, the text says—from far off, they cry out to him, “Jesus, master, have mercy on us.”

Now if we want to understand this text in its fullness, in all of the depth of the comfort that we have here, we have to understand something about the Old Testament Law regarding clean and unclean.

You see, why did these lepers have to stand far off? The Law said they had to stand far off. The Law said that leprous people, any people having the disease of leprosy were unclean. And so they were forbidden to make contact with anyone that was clean. They couldn’t come into the village. They couldn’t come close to a person. If someone was to accidently walk up to them, they would have to back off, and warn people of their leprosy by yelling out, “Unclean! Unclean!”

Think of the implications of that. To contract the disease of leprosy, you were cut off from your family. You were cut off from the people you love. You were cut off from the people you lived with and worshipped with. The only company you could keep was the company of other lepers.

That’s strike one. Not only did these lepers have a horrible, flesh-eating disease that caused your skin and limbs to deteriorate—a horrible fate in and of itself. But strike one, you were cut off from your family.

Strike two is that you were cut off from God. You see, if you were an Old Testament person, where would you go to find God? Every Old Testament person knew that you went to meet God in the temple. The temple is where God dwelt with his people. This is where the sacrifices were made for the people’s forgiveness. This is where God would bless the people with his Word. The temple is where God was.

We have to understand this: God’s temple was holy, and the Law said that nothing unclean, nothing unholy could come into the presence of God. And the Law said that there were certain people—you can read about this in the Book of Leviticus—who were unclean and unable to come into God’s presence.

For instance, if you were a woman and you had just delivered a baby, you were unclean for a time, you needed to be cleansed. If you had just come into contact with a dead body—that touching of a dead body would render you unclean, you couldn’t go to the temple then. And, significantly for our text today, if you were a leper—your leprosy meant that you were unclean. You had no access to God in the temple.

You were cut off from God. Strike one, lepers were cut off from family. Strike two, lepers were cut off from God. And strike three applies to this one leper at least, that we hear about, and it says that he was a Samaritans. I don’t have time to go into the whole history. Samaritans were considered half-pagan, and they had their own places of worship outside Jerusalem. They were not allowed in the temple.

And so when we look at this Samaritan leper, this is what we have to think. He’s alone. He’s isolated. No family. No friends. No coworkers. No colleagues. No God. “Jesus, master, have mercy on us.”

Maybe you feel that way. Oh I’m sure, you have many people around you in your life. But you might feel that not a single one of them is really listening to you, is really hearing you. And you feel alone. Or maybe, you had someone close to you die. And you want to talk to that person again. But you can’t. And you feel alone. Or maybe, you say your prayers, and you’ve got some things that you really, really are praying hard for. But you feel the only answer your getting from God is silence. And you’re alone.

You see, we’re like these lepers in this way. We are sinners. We are diseased with the leprosy of sin. And sin cuts us off from God, and sin cuts us off from other people. Sin severs our relationship with our Father in heaven. And sin destroys the relationships we have with other people here in earth. Sin doesn’t bring us close. Sin separates, and isolates, and makes us feel alone, like the leper.

So what does Jesus do? He sends these lepers to the priests in the temple. And why? Because the priests were the only people who could declare a formerly diseased to be healed, and free of disease. Because Jesus knew that as they were going, he would heal them. And the priest would see that they were healed, he would offer a sacrifice, and the person, that formerly unclean person would be clean. Because of Jesus.

And what did that mean? To be clean? Think of the enormous implications. To be clean meant, not just that they were healed of their horrible disease. That would’ve been great enough. But by cleansing them, *Jesus is granting them access to God. Access to their neighbors*. They can go back home to their families, to their homes, to their work. And now they can go to the temple: they can hear God’s voice, receive God’s gifts, participate in the liturgy for their atonement and forgiveness.

**Jesus grants these lepers, who were formerly cut off from God and neighbor, access to God and neighbor. And that’s salvation.** And then something amazing happens. We’re told that one of these lepers, the Samaritan leper, when he realizes he is healed—what does he do? He stops. Dead in his tracks. And he goes back. He goes back to the person that healed him and cleansed him. He goes back to Jesus. And when he goes back to Jesus, he falls on his face and worships God with great thanksgiving.

And why does he do that? You see this text teaches us something important about, where do we find God? I asked at the beginning of the sermon, where would an Old Testament person go to find God? In the temple. When the Son of God takes on human flesh and is made man at the Incarnation, a huge change takes place. A huge shift in, where God is. When the Son of God takes on your flesh, no longer do you find God, worship God in the temple like in the Old Testament. But where is God now? Wherever Jesus is. And wherever Jesus is, there is God. Wherever Jesus is, that’s where God is worshipped, praised, adored, and most importantly, wherever Jesus is—there is God to bless you.

And so where is Jesus today, dear saints? For you? He’s here. In his body and blood. And to even begin to wrap our minds around that tremendous mystery that this bread and wine is God, for us—we’ll never understand it with our mind. We’ll never see that with our eyes. We’ll only be able to believe it in faith.

I want you to try to imagine this in our minds, that this sanctuary, this chancel area here, is the Holy of Holies. You remember in the Old Testament, in the temple, there was this room, this inner sanctuary called the Holy of Holies. And that where God was. Picture a very dark room, with no light, filled with a cloud of incense. In the Holy of Holies there was the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was a box like, picture a bureau or a dresser. In the Ark were the two tables of the Law, Aaron’s budding staff, pot of manna. On top of the ark, there were two cherubim, two angels, with wings covering the Mercy Seat.

And that is where God lived. That’s where God was. Right there, in the Holy of Holies, over the Mercy Seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant, between the cherubim—that is where God dwelt. Who had access to God? We have to know in the Old Testament, access was very restricted. Only one man, the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies. And he, only one day a year, on the Day of Atonement. The High Priest would come into the Holy of Holies, he’d be carrying the blood of a sacrificial animal, and he would sprinkle blood over the four corners of the Ark, and over the floor of the Ark. And it was for the people’s atonement, forgiveness. But so a normal layperson in the Old Testament, had no direct access to God in the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest, and only one day of the year.

But what about us, we who live in the New Testament era? Where is the Holy of Holies now? Where is God now? It’s right here. And why? Because Jesus is here, with his body and blood. [And so the Church is a holy place. Because the Church is a holy place is the reason why things happen in Church, you find things in Church, you will never find anywhere else in the world. For instance in Church, we do a lot of singing and chanting. But I don’t go home a couple hours after the service and continue chanting with my family. “Good morning to you.” No, I don’t do that.

And in Church, I wear these vestments, these robes. This green one is called a chausible, I wear whenever we have Holy Communion. I don’t go home, continue to wear the chausible as I’m watching the Ravens game. In the same way, you don’t go into the streets of Ft. Wayne and see people processing down with a cross, and a book, wearing robes, singing and chanting.

We have to admit, things happen in Church, you find things in Church, you will never find anywhere else in the world. And why is that? Because the Church is a holy place. And the Church is a holy place, why? Because, Jesus is here, God is here, to meet us and bless us. Everything we do carries a sense of reverence and awe to be in God’s presence, and confesses this reality: the Church is a holy place.]

And, I want you to picture this with your mind, the unseen reality that’s going on when we gather for worship. When we gather around the Holy Communion were never alone. Angels are here: thousands upon thousands of angels singing praise to God with us here. The saints who are alive, folks in China, Africa, the U.S. and all over the world, with us here. And the saints who have gone before us in death. Where are you with them, where do you have communion with them? Here. And God is here. And Jesus is here, with his body and blood. When we gather around the Holy Communion were never alone.

So think of yourself like the leper. Think of yourself as having the disease, the leprosy of sin. And what does sin do to you? Sin cuts you off from God and your neighbor. But you come to Church, and when you do, Jesus is here to do for you what he did for the leper. He cleanses you. He makes you clean, by his Word and his Body and his blood. And by cleansing you, he brings you close, once again, close to God, close to brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus gives you access to God.

So that, you may have times in your life when you feel alone. You might have times in your life when you feel that no one is listening to you, no one understands you, that no one cares about you or the problems you are going through, and you’re alone. But when you come to the Holy Communion, you’re surrounded by the angels and the archangels and all the company of heaven. And Jesus, is here. And your Father, is here. And the Holy Spirit is here. For you, to forgive, to renew, to sanctify, to bless, to cleanse, to make whole. Here. The Church. A holy place. In this holy place, you are never alone.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit*. Amen.