

An Attitude of Gratitude

Leviticus 13:45-46

⁴⁵ The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” ⁴⁶ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Luke 17:11-19

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Theme Statement

In this last of four episodes in Luke’s gospel where “lepers” feature prominently, Luke makes some of his strongest theological points about Jesus’ identity, the saving power of God, and where gratitude for salvation is best offered.

Exploring the Word

Luke makes four references to people afflicted with skin diseases, an emphasis not found in any other gospel. Such diseases, identified by the word lepra in biblical Greek, were most likely something we might recognize today as psoriasis or eczema. The disease we call “leprosy,” or Hansen’s Disease, was unknown in biblical times. The skin conditions indicated by lepra had the appearance of decaying or decomposing skin; it is this suggestion of death or dying that rendered a person ritually unclean.

In Luke 4:24-28, Jesus recalls how the prophet Elisha cleansed the Syrian Naaman’s *lepra*. In Luke 5:12-14, Jesus cures a leper’s condition, qualifying the man for a declaration of “clean” by the temple priests. In Luke 7:22, the cleansing of lepers appears in a list known as “the works of the messiah.” The focus text culminates with elements of all three stories.

Leviticus 13:45-46 A command to make distinctions
Leviticus 13 contains instructions for priests regarding how to determine whether a person should be declared unclean on the basis of a skin disease. Priests did not make medical diagnoses, nor did they prescribe therapeutic interventions. They examined the features of the condition, and specific features or combinations of features resulted in verdicts of “clean” or “unclean.” The strict isolation described in verses 45-46 shows just how grave was the concern about the “unclean.” However, the concern was

not related to the spread of the disease as much as it was for the spread of ritual impurity.

Luke 17:11-14 What happens at the boundary?

The focus passage from Luke can be divided into two scenes. This first scene, verses 11-14, clearly resembles Luke 5:12-14. Both have the form of a healing narrative with the characteristic request of Jesus to do something. Both have features related to ritual purity in Jesus' command to go to the priests and references to being "made clean."

Jesus' command that the men show themselves to the priests highlights the ritually unclean dimension of their condition. But unlike Luke 5, there is here no specific word, touch, or gesture that occasions the healing, and no description that healing occurred ("the leprosy left him," 5:13). Here the afflicted are cleansed as they walk away. The difference between healing and cleansing is ambiguous, and Luke suggests that while Jesus is a healer, he also has power to make one clean—that is, prepared to approach the divine.

The story takes place in a borderland area, "the region between Samaria and Galilee" (v. 11). This is a liminal place, where boundaries are permeable. While Samaritans had long been despised by the Jews and great efforts were made to keep separate from each other, here *lepra* has created a new community of people bound by a shared condition rather than ethnic or religious identities. As a liminal space, it reflects the skin condition where the boundaries of the body are dissolving, as well as the first-century Jesus movement in which the boundary between Judaism and the emerging Christianity was also giving way.

Luke 17:15-19 What does it mean to be saved?

The second scene focuses on the response of the one *lepra*-afflicted man who returns to Jesus with thanksgiving and

praise. It shares several features with the Elisha-and-Naaman story (2 Kings 5:1-19). Jesus, like Elisha, extends God's mercy beyond the boundary of Judaism to foreigners.

Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Your faith has made you well" (v. 19). This shows the NRSV translators' choice to highlight the story's healing aspect. But this phrase can also be translated "Your faith has saved you." Jesus "saves" in the sense of rescuing the men from disease, but he also "saves" in declaring the cleansing that makes one holy for God.

Since all ten men were healed and all could be expected to have seen that they were, Luke suggests that the Samaritan leper "saw" (v. 15) what the others did not—the presence of God in the person and action of Jesus. The Samaritan takes over the function of the priests to declare a person clean or unclean. He "sees" for himself the transforming power of God in his life.

The Samaritan falls prostrate, glorifies God, and gives thanks—all elements of worship. He recognizes that beyond healing, beyond cleansing, he is in the presence of the holy God.

The Word Today

Many life circumstances vault people into liminal times, those "in-between" times when they are no longer who they once knew themselves to be but are not yet who they will become. A new job or job loss, a new relationship or divorce, the death of a loved one, the relocation of one's home, or a serious illness can disrupt stable life patterns and familiar routines. Such events introduce uncertainty about the future and one's place and purpose in it; they disturb one's sense of identity. During liminal times, people are acutely aware of something dying in themselves, while they wonder, in grief and worry, what will come next.

Organizations, institutions, and societies also go through liminal times. The past few decades have been such a time for the church in North America. Declining church membership, closing seminaries, and changes brought by the digital age suggest to some that the boundaries of familiar and beloved institutions and traditions are giving way. It is not always clear what the future church will look like, and here too there is sadness and anxiety.

We should maybe take care not to judge harshly the nine who head off to the priests (exactly as Jesus instructed them). They were not ungrateful; they were being faithful to Torah and to their traditions—and, when they could once again enter the temple, they were no doubt on their knees with gratitude. Are we not like them in our similar desire to be faithful? Are we not like them in wanting to express gratitude in the ways and places most familiar and meaningful to us?

Luke's gospel proclaims that in the disruption that was Jesus Christ, the holiness of God had come near. It proclaims that the human-made ritual of going to the priests to be declared "clean" in order to approach God had given way to the holy God's approach to humanity—in Jesus, and through Jesus' divine power to heal and make whole. It proclaims that in the changes of our liminal spaces, especially in deaths and losses, the Spirit of God through the person of Jesus the Christ continues to work its saving purposes.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What does the experience of gratitude feel like in your body?

2. How do you understand the word *salvation*? From what do you need saving?

Exploring the Word

1. Compare the story of Elisha and Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19a) with Jesus and the Samaritan leper (Luke 17:11-19, esp. 14-19). List similarities in details and themes.
2. Does learning that the biblical skin diseases are probably not leprosy change your impression of what Elisha and Jesus are accomplishing? If so, how?
3. How do the two different translations of Luke 17:19 change the meaning of the verse for you?

When the Samaritan leper is "made well," I imagine _____.

When the Samaritan leper is "saved," I imagine _____.

4. Why is it significant that the one who returns to give thanks and praise is a Samaritan?

The Word Today

1. How might this story speak to you in your liminal, in-between times? How might this story help you "see" what God is accomplishing through what seems to be going away?
2. Create a one-line prayer that you can repeat as a mantra of gratitude, one that would help you keep your eyes trained on God as the source of all that saves.

Closing Prayer

Merciful God, we call you our Savior, for that is what you are. We pray that the eyes of our hearts will be open to see the ways your love for us through Jesus Christ makes us both whole and holy for you. Amen.

Further Study

Leviticus 20:24-26; 2 Kings 5; Isaiah 61; Luke 4:16-30;
Luke 10:25-37

Daily Readings

M. Isaiah 56:1-8

F. John 4:39-42

T. Ruth 4:3-6, 13-15

S. Luke 17:1-10

W. Leviticus 13:1-8

S. Leviticus 13:45-56; Luke

T. 2 Kings 7:3-11

17:11-19

Memorization

Luke 17:15

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