

The Grateful “Other-Born”

In the name of him who remains faithful even when we are not, dear friends in Christ: Today’s Gospel, the account of the cleansing of ten leprous men, is the traditional text for Thanksgiving Day – now only a little bit more than a month away. To avoid repetition, this year I’ll have to choose a different reading for that occasion. Anyway, it’s easy to see why they chose this lesson for Thanksgiving inasmuch as it contrasts one man’s heartfelt gratitude to the Lord for his gracious gift of healing over and against the comparative ingratitude of nine others who, though they were no doubt happy that they were cleansed, were so wrapped up in the gift that they forgot about the Giver. And that, of course, is what our national Day of Thanksgiving is supposed to be about: not forgetting to give thanks to God for the blessings we enjoy in this highly favored land. Unfortunately, the story illustrates the sad truth almost too well: the rate of return for thanksgiving to God for his bounteous goodness is only about ten percent (at best).

Be that as it may, it’s probably because this text is associated with Thanksgiving that that’s the only way we tend to see it: as a Thanksgiving story. And while that’s clearly a major theme that we don’t want to neglect, there’s a lot more going on here. It’s some of these other themes I’d like to highlight this morning.

It turns out that there’s a lot of foreshadowing in the story. I mean look at the big picture: Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. He’s nearing the end of his earthly ministry. Very soon he will give his life on the cross. Why? To cleanse all of us from incurable leprosy of sin. Small wonder then that while on the way he pauses to cleanse these ten fellows of their dread disease. He’s telegraphing his next big play as it were.

And notice *how* he does it: by speaking a word. There are other accounts in the gospels of Jesus healing people suffering from leprosy. But in those cases he always touches the victims and says, “Be cleansed”. The leprosy vanishes instantly. But not this time. Here he only speaks to those who cry out to him for mercy, and it’s while they are following his instructions that they are cleansed – not all at once, but by degrees as they walk in the path of his direction. That sounds familiar. How are we cleansed from sin? By hearing the Word of Jesus and walking in the way he lays out for us in our life together here in the Church. Does this cleansing happen all at once? Well, no; it’s as we go constantly hearing the voice of Jesus that we are cleansed.

And then there’s the faith factor. When all is said and done, Jesus tells the man who returned to give thanks that it was *his faith* that saved him. It wasn’t what he did. It wasn’t any inherent quality or merit that he possessed. It wasn’t even his returning to give thanks to the Lord. No, he was saved by his faith – and specifically his faith in Jesus. That’s what saved him – just as we are saved by our faith in Jesus and what he did on the cross to work salvation for us. So you see, in many ways this little episode gives us a brief overview of important truths soon to be revealed in greater detail.

With that in mind, I’d like to dig a little deeper and see if we can’t mine some other precious nuggets of truth from this text. Let’s start with the leprosy. I’m sure I’ve mentioned before the devastating physical effects of this horrible disease, what with its numbing of nerves, destruction of flesh, and disfiguring of the face. To contract the disease meant existing in a kind of living death, your body rotting away even while you lived. But that was only one aspect of the

misery caused by leprosy, for anyone who was diagnosed with it was instantly made an outcast. You could no longer have any contact with your family, friends, or loved ones. You'd be forced to leave your home and village. You'd end up in some out of the way place where the land was not usable for agriculture, perhaps a gully or unused rock quarry, where others like you had set up a little shanty-town of ramshackle shelters and tents. There you lived off the charity of those who were once close to you – but who could never again see your face.

That was another thing: those with leprosy had to keep all exposed skin covered: face, hands, everything. I suppose it had to do with not forcing others to have to see the grotesque ravishes of the disease; but part of the effect of it would be to rob you of your identity. You were no longer recognizable as Bill or Charlie or Phyllis or Liz; no, now you were just *a leper*. The disease became your identity. And your conversation with those who were healthy was reduced to just one word: “unclean”. That's what you were required to cry out whenever you saw someone to warn them not to draw near to you.

So the disease robbed you of everything: your health, your relationships, your home, your career – even who you are (or were). It made you an utter outcast; the only company you were fit for were others like you who were rotting away in lonely, abject misery without any hope, for you see, there was no cure. And that's why the disease is such a fitting metaphor for the state of being in sin. Oh sure, we try to cover it up, try to hide who we really are from the sight of the world. We don't want anyone to see the ugly condition of our hearts or the wretched and selfish things we're thinking; but inside it's all unclean. Our sin isolates us, divides us, destroys our relationships. It steals our identity, keeping us from being the godly, loving people we'd really like to be. It makes us outcasts with respect to God and one another. And in the end it kills us. Oh, and like leprosy in the ancient world, for sin there is no cure. And this connection between sin and leprosy was highlighted (in Israel anyway) by the fact that only a priest, not a doctor, could diagnose the disease. And only a priest could pronounce someone cured. But the latter never happened.

At least it didn't happen until nine guys showed up at the temple one day claiming to have been cured; which makes me wonder: how did they even get to the temple to see a priest? You see, until a priest declared them clean, they would still have had to wear the garments and bandages that clearly marked them as lepers. Do you suppose the gatekeepers at Jerusalem would have let them into the city? “Yeah, c'mon in and infect us all!” Or the temple guards, if they managed to get past the city gates, would they have let them enter the sacred courts? Not bloody likely. And their protestations would have seemed pathetic and ridiculous: “Oh, you're *cured lepers*, are you? All nine of you? Sure. That happens every day around here—*not!*” I'd kind of like to know how that played out in the end.

But we need to turn our attention to the one guy for whom we know how things turned out: the guy who returned to give thanks to Jesus. We're told that he was a Samaritan. This raises a couple of other issues, for the Jews considered Samaritans to be unclean even when they were healthy. Normally there would be no association at all between Jews and Samaritans. To the Jews, Samaritans were outcasts. This was for a number of reasons. First was their ancestry. The Samaritans were a mixed race, the descendants of unfaithful Israelites who had intermarried with various pagan peoples who had been transplanted by foreign powers into Israel at the time of the exile, some six centuries before the time of Christ. So the Jews despised the Samaritans for their contaminated, “muddy” bloodlines. The other thing was their religion. The Samaritans claimed to worship the one true God – the God of the Jews – but they refused to recognize that the place to worship him was at the temple in Jerusalem. Now, some of this was probably not by their choice. The Jews wouldn't let Samaritans worship at the

temple. As a matter of fact there were signs on the temple courts which prohibited any foreigner from entering – on pain of death. So at some point in history, the Samaritans had set up an alternate worship site on a mountain in their own land. This galled the Jews. “How dare those mixed race, mongrel dogs claim that our God, the God of the Jews – we the chosen ones of the Lord – how dare they claim that our God is theirs too? And how dare they imagine that the Lord can be worshipped anywhere on earth except for here in Jerusalem his holy city?” To the Jews who hated all Gentiles (that is anyone other than Jews), the Samaritans were the worst.

And I think that explains why the other nine lepers didn’t seem to mind this Samaritan guy hanging out with them. Normally there would be no association; but in a way, I think they liked having him around. Even though they were all rotting away with exactly the same disease, they could say to themselves, “At least I’m not as sick, as rotten, and low as him.” And again, the connection to the sinful condition is apparent. No matter how sinful we admit we are, it’s a comfort to know that there’s someone even more sinful than myself – because then I can claim some goodness, some merit, some worthiness in me that doesn’t make me all that bad. And don’t get me wrong, this way of thinking not a good thing. The point is that even while confessing our sin and absolute unworthiness, we are blind to the sinful pride that wants to think of ourselves as better than someone else.

And maybe this explains why it was the Samaritan who was the one who returned to give thanks to Jesus. Hanging out with nine Jewish lepers, he would always have been reminded by them that he was inferior to all them. Whatever pride he had was constantly under attack. And while that surely caused some resentment, in the end he even had to swallow the humiliating pill that was Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, who healed him. The point is that he, far more than the others, would have recognized that he didn’t deserve it. And thus he was that much more inclined to be thankful.

And what follows is some delicious irony in the story. First, we’re got a Samaritan who, according to the Jews, didn’t know where to worship the Lord. But he’s the only one who ends up worshiping at the feet of Jesus, which is the one right place. And while Jesus had said to them all, “Go, show yourself to the priests”, it’s only the Samaritan who, when he realizes he’s been cleansed, goes to the one true high priest, Jesus, who could pronounce not only his diseased body clean, but who could also with the Word of his forgiveness cleanse his soul of sin.

Finally, there are the questions of Jesus: “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this *foreigner*?” It’s an interesting word that Jesus uses there for foreigner. It’s not the standard word the Jews used for Gentiles. The word Jesus uses here is (in Greek) “Allo-genæs”, which translated more literally would be “other-born”, that is, born something other than a Jew. It’s the word, not coincidentally, that was on those signs in the temple that told non-Jews to stay out, that they weren’t welcome.

And what we’ve got here is still more of the foreshadowing of the story. It points ahead to how, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Jews would largely reject the cleansing Gospel message of Christ crucified for sinners. They imagined that as God’s chosen people, they didn’t need it. Their pride and inflated sense of self worth prevented them from seeing that they too needed to be cleansed from sin. No, instead the Gospel would be received with joy and thanksgiving primarily by those who were not born of God’s chosen people Israel. It was among the foreigners – the “other-borns” – that the Gospel spread and the Church grew; again, precisely because they recognized that they didn’t deserve it.

And coming full circle now, this is important for us because we must remember that we too are “other-borns”. So many of us have grown up in the Church. We’ve heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ all of our lives, and thus we don’t remember a time when we were among the outcasts. But we all started there. We were all born in sin and uncleanness: born something other than a child of God and an heir of eternal life. But by God’s grace we were washed. We were cleansed. We were given rebirth and new life as the Word of Christ was spoken and we were baptized into the name of the Triune God and the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The danger is that we come to take it for granted; which is why it’s good to remember our Baptisms daily, to remember that we are, like this Samaritan, among those who are other-born. Then we too, with gratitude in our hearts, will come evermore and worship at the feet of Jesus giving thanks to God for cleansing us through him; and we will hear Jesus’ word of blessing, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well”. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!