

On the surface the story seems pretty straightforward. Jesus encounters 10 lepers. They call out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Jesus tells them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were on their way to the priests to do what Jesus commanded, they found that they had been healed of leprosy.

And one of the ten turned around, and went back to thank Jesus. And he prostrated himself, he threw himself down at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And Luke says, he was a Samaritan.

Then Jesus asks, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" The 9 Jews didn't return, only the one Samaritan. Then Jesus says to the Samaritan ex-leper, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

But for me this Gospel lesson raises two questions:

1. Why didn't the nine Jewish lepers return?
2. And why did the Samaritan return?

First, where were the other nine?

Martin Bell was one of my Dad's classmates in seminary. He lived in the student apartment above us when I was an infant. Fr. Bell was an Episcopal priest—he died a few years back. But he was best known for being the author of the book, *The Way of the Wolf*.

There are a number of poems and short stories in this book. Many of them center on the figure of Jesus portrayed as a beautiful wolf in the forest. The most famous and poignant story in the book is "Barrington Bunny," a story about a rabbit who saves a baby mouse from freezing one cold Christmas Eve.

But amongst these stories and poems is a brief reflection on the story of the 10 lepers from Luke. Fr. Bell has titled the story, "Where are the Nine?"

I won't read it to you. But I will summarize his imaginative reflections on why the other nine lepers might not have returned to Jesus.

Fr. Bell surmises that leper #1 one simply frightened. Being healed scared him and he looked for some place to hide.

#2 was offended because he hadn't been asked to do something more difficult before being healed. It's very much like our Old Testament lesson about General Naaman being offended because he was told to wash in the river, rather than doing something more difficult. So the second leper didn't return to Jesus.

#3 thought that it might have been better if he were still a leper. He didn't know what to do—he realized that he had relied upon his leprosy for his sense of identity, and now it was gone.

#4 forgot about returning to Jesus. He was so overjoyed, he just forgot.

#5 had spent so long begging and was so burnt out that he was no longer able to thank anyone for anything. And that included going back to thank Jesus.

#6, Fr. Bell imagines, was a woman. Her leprosy had separated her from her husband and family. Now that she had been healed she was trying to get home to them as quickly and directly as she could.

#7 didn't believe in anything miraculous. Yes, he knew that he had been cleansed, but he didn't accept that Jesus had anything to do with it. It must have just been a coincidence.

#8 was just the opposite. He totally believed that Jesus healed him. And because of that he wanted to go out and proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of God was at hand and that the Messiah had arrived.

#9 did as Jesus told him. He went to the priest with a smile on his face. And then he went down the road, filled with a sense of the power of God.

Martin Bell's imaginative account ascribes reasons why none of the nine Jewish lepers returned to thank Jesus. Some of them were good reasons. All of them were understandable reasons.

And I would add another reason. If the nine were following Jewish law and Jesus' command to show themselves to the local priest, then they would have had to undergo a 2 stage process to be certified as clean. They would have to make an initial visit to the priest. Then they would have to undergo a week long ritual cleansing period. And then they would go to the priest for the final certification of being healed. Only then would they be fully restored to their families and to the Jewish community.

But ex-leper that returned to see Jesus was a Samaritan.

Ancient Jews didn't want to have anything to do with Samaritans. Samaritans were religiously and ethnically tainted as far as most Jews were concerned.

So no Jewish priest would want to have anything to do with a Samaritan ex-leper.

The Samaritan ex-leper would never have been part of the Jewish community before he became a leper. And even after being healed he would never be a part of any Jewish group.

But he is able to find another group. And that group is centered on Jesus. He returns to Jesus.

Notice again what the Samaritan ex-leper does. When the early Christians heard the story they would certainly notice it.

Luke first says that the man is praising God.

Then he prostrates himself at Jesus' feet. Don't miss this. He is praising God. But he also puts himself in an attitude of worship toward Jesus. He is treating Jesus the same way he would treat God.

Then he thanks Jesus. The original word Luke uses is *eucharistōn*. That's the verb for giving thanks. That's the source of our word Eucharist. Early Christians would certainly connect these dots.

And then Jesus tells him, "Get up." The word means "stand up." But it also is the same word for being raised from death into new life.

And then Jesus tells him "Go on your way; your faith has made you well." Or you could translate it, your faith has saved you, your faith has brought you salvation.

The early Christians who first heard Luke would have noticed the pattern in the story. They would have noticed these things being mentioned:

- Praising God.
- Worshipping Jesus.
- Offering thanksgiving or Eucharist.
- Being raised to new life.
- Experiencing the salvation Jesus brings.
- Then going and living into that new life.

This is a pattern for the Christian life. It is also the pattern of Christian worship. It's what the early Christians engaged in when they came to worship every Sunday:

- Praising God.
- Worshipping Jesus.
- Offering thanksgiving or Eucharist.
- Being raised to new life.
- Experiencing the salvation Jesus brings.
- Then going and living into that new life.

So don't miss the meaning of all of this.

There was no way that the Samaritan ex-leper could ever be part of the Jewish people.

But... BUT Luke wants us to know that he can be part of the people of God in a different way: by coming to Jesus, by sharing in Jesus' resurrected life, by experiencing the healing and salvation he brings, by gathering at his table for Eucharist.

And for 21st century Christians, we have exactly the same opportunity. That is why we're here this morning.

Yes, we know church attendance in America is on the decline these days. Yes, there are lots of reasons people don't come to church as much anymore. Yes, some of them may be excuses. But some are understandable reasons. And some may even be good reasons.

But you are here this morning. Like the Samaritan ex-leper, you've come. You've come to praise God. You've come to worship Jesus. You've come to offer thanksgiving. You've come seeking healing and salvation.

We've been given awesome gifts from God.

As one of my favorite writers says, "God is the giver of all things: every mouthful of food we take, every breath of air we inhale, every note of music we hear, every smile on the face of a friend, a child, a spouse—all that, and a million things more are good gifts from his generosity."¹

And you have come this morning to offer praise, to worship, to give thanks, and to share in the new life Jesus brings.

Where are the nine? We don't know for sure.

Where are you? You are here.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give him thanks and praise.

¹N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*