

We Lutherans, as well as most mainline protestants and Roman Catholics, use the Revised Common Lectionary, which gives us a three year rotation of readings for worship. That means that the last time we would have encountered today's gospel in a Sunday (or Saturday) service would have been about this time of year in 2019—that is, before words like *covid*, *social distancing*, and *PPE* became part of our everyday vocabulary. For the Church in our time and place, there has never been, and God willing, there never will be again, another time when we will read this passage with the fresh clarity of that pandemic perspective, when we will regard Luke's ten quarantined characters with as much compassion, understanding, and empathy—both for the nine who could not wait to get back to normal life as they knew it, and for the one who was so overcome with gratitude at being healed that he could not help but cry out in thanksgiving to God.

The ancients certainly didn't have our modern medical understanding of bacteria, viruses, and contagion, but they knew enough to quarantine sick people to prevent the spread of disease. God's law required that those afflicted by certain illnesses isolate themselves, at least from the Temple and public worship, if not from the entire community, unless or until their condition improved and they were presumed to no longer be a danger to others. Since there wouldn't have been too many MD's or board certified dermatologists running around, it was up to the priests to give people a clean bill of health and permission to reintegrate into the general population. So the ten lepers in today's story suffered in two ways: leprosy itself, with no cure or treatment, was painful and debilitating; but they also suffered the isolation of being cut off from the support and companionship of their family, friends, and community.

Luke portrays these characters as outsiders in every way: he sets the story in the border region between Samaria and Galilee, an area that couldn't claim a strong identity as Israelite or Samaritan. The lepers are excluded even from this border village. They don't try to interact directly with Jesus but stay at a distance while they ask him for mercy: it is unclear whether by that request they're asking for physical healing or some other act of compassion and connection—maybe food or supplies since they would have had to rely on charity, or even a kind word of blessing from Jesus, whose reputation must have preceded him even in this no-man's land, even to those who weren't allowed in town to hear stories of his preaching, teaching, feeding, and healing.

The mercy that Jesus shows the lepers is an act of miraculous healing; he tells them to go show themselves to the priests, implying that the priests will pronounce them free of leprosy. All ten obey Jesus' instruction, and they discover as they go that they have been healed. Nine

of them apparently continue on to see the priests for confirmation of their healing, which, after all, is exactly what Jesus told them to do. But one comes back to praise God and thank Jesus—and Luke notes that he was a Samaritan, which is gospel-code for *outsider*—*one of those people*. We can infer that at least some of the other ten were Israelites because Jesus points out that the only one who turned back to praise God was a foreigner—again, in contrast to those who would be expected to recognize an act of God and respond appropriately with worship.

Jesus tells the Samaritan to get up and go on his way. But notice he doesn't say the man's faith has *healed* him...although the faithful obedience of all ten lepers to Jesus' instruction seems to have been part of their healing. Instead, Jesus says that his faith has *made him well*. Being well is more than merely being free from disease. Whether the other nine former lepers recognized their healing as an act of God or not, none of them celebrated it as such. The Samaritan alone experiences both the healing of his disease and the joy of receiving God's mercy; so Jesus points to his faith as the reason that, as the good old hymn would say it, it is well, it is well with his soul.

Whether we are talking about the pandemic or other health problems, or interpersonal struggles, or bigger systemic issues like injustice, violence, war, or poverty, living lives of faith means we find wholeness and wellness in God's merciful love for us. If we can only find peace in the absence of illness, in the absence of strife, in the absence of social turmoil, we're never going to be well. Yet that's cause for hope, not despair, because God doesn't wait to be present with us until we can look at all the aspects of our lives and declare ourselves healthy, balanced, and stable by society's definitions. The nine lepers were so eager to have someone tell them that they were healthy and whole again, they didn't stop to celebrate the obvious truth that they were, in fact, already healed. What set the Samaritan apart was not that he was the only one who was grateful; it was that he was the only one who didn't wait for someone else's approval to restore him to the fullness of life—he recognized that God and only God could do that, and had.

When scripture tells us to give thanks in all circumstances, it's not a flippant denial of the very real hardship and struggle in our lives. It's an invitation to recognize that God remains faithful to us, always, even when the world would tell us that we'll never be whole and well until we fix what is all too often unfixable. God doesn't wait to gift us with mercy; may we not wait to give thanks to the God who is faithfully present with us in our joy, in our sorrow, and everywhere in between.