

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, October 14, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 17:11-19

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable to You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My two-year-old grandson, Eli, is going through a phase. As soon as he enters our house, he looks up at my wife, Caroline, and he says, “Nana, witch!” I’d better explain. He means the “Wizard of Oz” tape. He wants to see the “Wizard of Oz” tape. It’s not Caroline. I don’t know what you were thinking.

I think there is a parallel between “The Wizard of Oz” and the ten lepers. After you hear it, you may not agree, but I think the parallel is they were all healed on the journey. There is a strong message here about the way faith works. It is something that operates on a journey. You remember in “The Wizard of Oz” Dorothy and the scarecrow and the tin woodsman and the cowardly lion, well, their journey was perilous and through many obstacles. They were seeking the Wizard to make them whole, but their healing happens on the journey, not all at once. As they journey, the cowardly lion manages to fight his fears and dangers. When thinking is required, the brainless scarecrow manages to think them out of it. As for the tin woodsman, who is journeying in search of a heart, he has so much pity and compassion within him that because of his tears, they have to carry an oil can, if you remember, to keep him from rusting shut. When they finally reach the Wizard, he points out that each of them already has what they had traveled so far to find.

This is where the story becomes something more than a story. The point is that things like courage and love and wisdom come to us after we take the first step toward finding them. The Bible says it is much the same in faith. Faith is not something that is just handed to us prepackaged. Faith begins when we begin the journey toward God.

James 4:8 says, “Come near to God, and He will come near to you.” It is this principle that I’m referring to. So, Luke tells us that these ten outcast lepers, who sought healing, were told to go and act as if they had already been healed. As they went on their way, they found they actually were healed. They were stepping out in faith, and that means to act and grab hold of that which is promised in faith, but not yet evidenced in the real world. In the action and accepting the promise, faith fulfills the promise.

Faith does change things. Faith does change you. I love this corny, but seasonally-correct, if not theologically-correct, explanation of what it means to be a faithful Christian. A coworker asked a lady recently baptized and serious about her Christian faith what it’s like to be a Christian, and she said, “Well, it’s sort of like being a pumpkin. God picks you up from the patch, brings you in, washes all the dirt off you, opens you up, scoops out all the yucky stuff, then removes the seeds of doubt, removes the seeds of hate and greed and judgment, and carves you a new, smiling face, and puts His light inside of you to shine out for all the world to see.”

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Now, if I haven't lost you yet comparing you to characters in Oz and pumpkins, then let me get back to the lepers from whom you will certainly run. Everyone ran from the lepers. They were required to by Levitical law. People were to stay away from them, and they were required to stay outside the city and away from people, and if anyone came near, they were to yell, “Unclean! Unclean!” They lived, begging, from a distance. They were socially as good as dead, no more families, no more friends, no more right to return to their communities. They had only each other in small bands of lepers. If we truly are talking about leprosy as we know it today, Hansen's disease, it is a horribly disfiguring disease, a disease which some may not know makes you slowly insensitive to pain so that you do not know when you are injuring yourself, and so unknowingly you injure yourself over and over until infections and the progression of the disease causes disfigurement and slowly, ever so slowly, death. Leprosy is an apt analogy for sin.

I want you to try to imagine with me if you can, if you have a visual memory, imagine a short film, and we're producing that short film right now. The film is about someone's mind into which you can see, and this person is struggling mightily with the decision to do something that they know is wrong and harmful. You are the camera watching this internal dialogue, and try to see the parts of the dialogue that fit your life. The first time you do something, something you know is wrong, it is hard, and you agonize, and then you finally give into it, and you do it, and you feel sort of bad, but hey, lightning didn't come out of the sky and strike you dead so maybe it's not so bad! Maybe I don't need to worry about what is right and what is wrong! What hurts me or hurts others, or whether or not it's fair or slanted or the truth. You know, everybody cheats, don't they? Everybody lies, and everybody steals at least to the IRS. Everybody sculpts the truth to their advantage so what's the big deal. I'm just like everybody else around me. Then in the film, the camera is going to zoom out and show tens and hundreds and thousands and millions of people all rationalizing the same, all hurting themselves and hurting others by what they do and by what they fail to do, all convinced that everybody cheats, everybody lies, everybody steals, and so that is what they do to themselves and to others.

As the camera zooms further out, we see in this imaginary film the risen Christ with a tear running down His cheek, and the short film ends with the title, “The Leper Colony.” C. S. Lewis, former agnostic and later a Christian apologist, wrote the following. He said, “Someday, when the earth is cleansed of sin, all Heaven will come and visit us, and we will see what marvelous creatures and angels and others populate God's Kingdom, but for now, the rest of creation stays away from our planet because we are sick.” He says, “All of the earth is like a leper colony. We are sick with sin. We are out of our right minds. We are infected with a disease that makes us insensitive to our own wounds unaware of the grotesque manner with which we treat others and with which we treat God.”

We are still spiritual lepers on our way to healing and wholeness. Now, we sometimes try to live as if all is right with the world, but all is not right with the world, and all is not right with us! A part of us, the godly part, knows it. We once may have agonized over sins that hurt our bodies and hurt others and hurt our reputations and hurt the reputations

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of others. We once may have apologized over our sins of selfishness and greed where we looked the other way and said, “Mine! Mine!” the same way I know my two-year-old grandson to say, “Mine!” As adults, we have much more sophisticated ways to say, “Mine!” or “Not yours!” We have extended philosophies and ideologies and even theologies, but most of the time, we divide the world up into them and us, and I will do what I must do to keep me and mine safe and better than them. We make ourselves outcasts as we cast our concern for others out the window.

There is an ancient word for what God intended for us. The Hebrew word is “Shalom.” Everybody knows that Shalom means peace, but it means more than that. It means enough, that there should be enough for everyone. Peace, Shalom, enough, that is what God intended from the beginning, and that is a dream that we still have, that there be peace, that there be health, and enough for everyone and wholeness. It is an ideal that none of us has ever known. The truth – the costly truth that might cost me to change or change my income or change my behavior or change my use of time – that truth is unpleasant. Truth is a great idea, but why am I going to be the one to tell it? Why am I going to be the one to change and pay the price when nobody else seems to be?

And so, we like the people in that film, we once felt the weight of living less than the dream of God’s dream of Shalom, but now we are more or less comfortably numb. I no longer feel guilty when I lie. I know that others do the same, and we may say I don’t feel guilty when I cheat because I know others do the same, and I might say that I don’t feel guilty when I steal or fail to give to others what might help them because I need it! It’s mine and no one else is giving so why should I!

We are living in a sort of a leper colony, everyone for themselves. This earth, this fallen, twisted, distorted creation where everybody blames everybody else for not doing what ought to be done and apparently none of us can feel fully the pain anymore, but we know that something isn’t right. We know that something isn’t right.

In the book by Morley, The Man in the Mirror, an anonymous letter came to a pastor once, and this is from the book. Dear pastor, you know me very well. I sit toward the front of the church every Sunday. I’m always there. On the way out, I always greet you with a handshake and a smile, and you seem glad to see me, too, but you don’t know the real me very well. Behind my happy smile is a life that is somehow unbalanced. Occasionally, you have asked me how I am doing, and I’ve told you, “I’m fine, how about you?” The truth is I’m not sure you really want an answer. I know you deal with a lot of real pain and real suffering, people losing jobs, their homes, their families, and loved ones. Frankly, I am embarrassed to talk to you about where I am spiritually. I’m supposed to be on top of things. After all, I’m a successful businessman. I’ve tried to take a look at my life, to examine my ways, but the plain truth is I don’t know! I don’t know how! I really enjoy your sermons. They move my emotions and spirit, but on Monday morning at 9:00 a.m. when the phones start ringing and the customers start complaining, I just can’t seem to make the transition. I really need help. Somehow, I sense that my problems are really spiritual problems, but I cannot find spiritual answers.

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I know that my marriage looks like a picture of success, but behind closed doors, behind the closed doors of my private castle, life is very different. I would be ashamed for you to know. I know lots of people, but I am really a very lonely man. The letter ends, but not the pain.

You could be here in church each week in the pews with your skin intact, but with your heart hollow, missing courage, not in your right mind. You may feel like the lepers did, a dead man walking, disconnected and alone. You may feel like you're on a journey to nowhere. In sin, as in leprosy, you sometimes can't know how spiritually sick or broken you are unless you take a serious look at yourself. One bad choice, one bad decision at a time, each one freely made, freely turning away from God, this is how we find ourselves far away in a far country crying out, “Lord, save me!” Kyria elaison we have sung. Lord have mercy on us!

But listen, there is good news. Don't miss the good news. You cry out, “God save me!” and God will. As they journeyed, they were healed. The story does not end just with a physical healing. It ends with the words of Jesus, “Your faith has saved you.” Now, some translations say your faith has made you well or has healed you, but literally these same words are translated, “Your faith has saved you.”

Dr. Fred Craddock wrote, “What we have then is a story of ten being healed, but one being saved, one being made whole, spiritually and physically.” Lord have mercy. We want to be healed, but more than that we want to be restored to God and feel God's gracious presence all around, and we want to be restored in communion with our neighbors, with our friends, with our family. Jesus looks upon this grateful brother, and He smiles and says, “Rise up and go. You're saved.” Rise up to new life. You are a new creation. You are a new child of God. Live like it. So this one whose healing is more soul-deep than skin-deep begins to live out the truth. The Kingdom of God is within you. The Kingdom of God is within you, and is within you and you and you and you and you and you.

Wake up! Open your eyes! Wake up and see God's new reality. Faith can pull aside the curtain, and in this situation, he saw God in Christ, and the power to change and what his life could be, and he was changed forever. He no longer had the disease. He no longer had a hollow heart. He didn't even go or didn't wait to find a priest to have him certified clean. He just went back to Jesus and thanked Him.

You know, it's funny. I looked for it, but could not find it. I used to have a little yellow card from the Centers for Disease Control. It was a yellow card with red writing on it. It looked about as important as anything could look. They gave it to me at JFK coming back from Africa several years ago. There had been an outbreak of Ebola in Africa, and they gave me this card, which said not to certify me clean, but it said, “If you start bleeding from all your pores, go see your family physician.” Your tax dollars at work.

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Now, the card for me was merely a curiosity. I was not a thousand miles in Africa from where the outbreak was. I kept it for awhile. I didn't have Ebola. I had nothing to fear, and I had nothing to celebrate. I was the same as when I left. Here's the point. Jesus offers forgiveness and new life. The Gospel might seem to you like a mere curiosity. You're not sin sick! You have nothing to fear and nothing to celebrate! You're the same as before! Nine out of ten people didn't get what Jesus was doing. They just went with a physical healing back into their old life. One out of ten returned and praised God and gave thanks for new life. Why aren't we more joyous? God in Christ is cleansing us as we go. We are not yet fully clean. We are not yet fully whole, but we on the journey we are being made so. In the end before we face God, we will be so, not by anything we have done, but only by the grace of God, who can cleanse us from all sin, from all unrighteousness. Sin does still seem to have power. I'll grant you that death does take our loved ones out of our sight for a time, but we have faith that if Jesus can overcome the tomb itself and as a complete innocent serve as our Pascal lamb, then in the end even death can have no hold. Do you believe this? Then why aren't you jumping up and down?

Jesus said your faith is making you well. It's making you whole. It's healing you inside and out. Stop justifying, rationalizing your continuing sins and selfish and hurtful and judgmental behavior. Stop it! Your faith has made you well, now, rejoin the human race, healed and whole, and act like it. God does not heal us so we can go right back into the same old, same old everybody does it. God heals us for new life, a different life, a life with a smile on the outside, a light on the inside, and arms opened to friends and enemies. No longer an outcast! No longer seeking to make others into outcasts! Have mercy, Lord, have mercy. God has had mercy on us. Let us be merciful to others.

I thank God for glimpses of peace, for moments of joy, for the promise that there is more than this to life, and I thank God for what God has done for me, given me what I really needed – a new beginning! Now, I can be what I was meant to be as I grow along the journey of faith, the healing that comes along the journey of faith. God give you peace. God give you direction. God give you strength to grow in your journey of faith. Amen.