

HOW GREAT JOURNEYS BEGIN

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

October 13, 2019; 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

2 Kings 5:1-15; Luke 17:11-19

“...as they went, they were made clean.”

– Luke 17:14b

Last night I had the pleasure of attending my forty-fifth high-school reunion: Toms River High School South, Class of 1974. It’s not the first one of these I’ve been to; our class is pretty good about holding reunions. It’s always an eye-opening experience to walk into the room, look around, and try to match up names with faces. That is not always easy.

You know, it’s a strange thing: the more years that go by, the older those people get! Everybody but me, of course. Inside, I feel like I’m the same person I was back then. How did I get into a room with all those old people?

People *do* change. And more than the thickening torsos and the wrinkles around the eyes, at a reunion you can sometimes glimpse signs of interior change as well. Like the people everybody used to pick on, the ones that were the objects of ridicule. Adolescents can be cruel to one another: what seemed like harmless fun at the time looks harsh and self-centered from the vantage-point of years. It’s a relief to see how many of those individuals turned out to be pretty fine people after all, despite the horrors some of us put them through.

It doesn't always turn out so well, of course. Being marginalized — which, sadly, happens in nearly every human community — can be devastating. Today's New Testament lesson tells of a group of people who were marginalized in the culture of their day: not because they were tall and gangly, or had a strange laugh, or always seemed to have bad hair days: but because they had a chronic disease that rendered them ritually unclean, according to religious law.

Ten lepers come up to Jesus as he's walking along the road. That seems an awfully large group, but it's not so unusual: because lepers in biblical times tended to stick together. They had to. It was a matter of survival.

Leprosy — known today as Hansen's Disease — is a terrible affliction. It's treatable today with antibiotics, but back then it was incurable. We now know it to be a persistent bacterial infection, but in biblical times all anybody knew was that it caused scaly patches to appear all over the skin. Victims would lose sensation in their fingers and toes, which meant they could injure themselves without knowing it. That, combined with the persistent infections, led to hands and feet and even faces becoming horribly deformed, so the unfortunate victims could no longer lead a normal life.

Not that there was much work for them anyway, because leprosy was so widely feared that its victims were typically quarantined: banished from the

community out of fear that the contagion would spread. Victims of leprosy suffered twice: first from the effects of their disease and second from the emotional trauma of being rejected by everyone they loved.

Bands of lepers — like the ten Jesus encounters on the road — were communities of necessity. They formed improvised families, clinging to each other for mutual protection and survival.

Jesus and his disciples meet this little group as they're traveling through the region between Samaria and Galilee. The location is significant. They're in the borderlands: the frontier between the Jewish province of Galilee and the land of the Samaritans.

My wife, Claire, and I have recently returned from an overseas trip. We were on a mission/study tour to Armenia. It was a very rich experience, and I'll have a lot to share about it in the coming weeks. Today, though, the only thing I'll mention about the trip is what it felt like to be in the borderlands.

If you've ever traveled internationally through an airport, you know what I'm talking about. Once you go through passport control in the nation you're coming from, you find yourself in an odd, in-between place. The first place you go through is the duty-free shop. Glitzy, discounted merchandise is all around you: discounted because — at least in economic terms — you're no longer in one

country or another, but in-between. The same pertains for your airplane flight, and then continues as you disembark at the airport back home. You wait in a line at passport control, stepping up at last to a glass booth. There, a poker-faced official in uniform scrutinizes your picture, then yourself. At last the rubber stamp comes out, and you get your passport back. Next comes baggage claim: then, finally, dragging your luggage behind you, you walk through customs. It's only then that you pass, at last, from the borderlands into the real world.

Maybe Jesus and his disciples have a similar borderlands experience along that desolate stretch of road. Neither Judea nor Samaria, but somewhere in-between. Where the lepers live.

It wasn't an especially peaceful border. Although the Jews and the Samaritans have common ancestors and worship the One God, centuries of prejudice and distrust divide them. "Never trust a Jew," say the Samaritans; "Never trust a Samaritan," say the Jews. You get the picture.

One of the ten lepers Jesus heals is a Samaritan; the rest are presumably Jews. "Go and show yourselves to the priests," Jesus says to them. This is standard operating procedure for Jewish people with a skin disease, according to the book of Leviticus. Once someone's been declared ritually unclean, the only road back to polite society is to go to a priest. He will examine the person's skin, then put the

supplicant through a ritual of religious purification.

All ten lepers, on Jesus' say-so, head off down the road, in search of a priest. But one of them turns back.

That one who does is the Samaritan. He returns, praising God, to visit the man who saved him.

Countless sermons and Bible-study lessons, over the years, have held this Samaritan up as that rarest paragon of human nature: a truly thankful person. Countless preachers have lambasted the other nine as ungrateful scoundrels, who collect the goodies from Jesus but are never heard from again. Remember how, when you were a kid, your mother made you sit down and write a thank-you note to that elderly aunt who sent you a hand-knit sweater for Christmas? From the way some interpreters have handled this passage, you'd think that was the nine former lepers' chief offense: they forgot to send a thank-you. Emily Post would be horrified: oh, the humanity!

No, Jesus is praising the Samaritan not because he says thanks — the Son of God hardly needs a thank-you — but because, as Luke explicitly tells us, he comes back “praising God with a loud voice.”

There's a reason it's the Samaritan who does this. The Samaritan could hardly go to the *Jewish* priests for a rite of purification: that would be kind of like

a Buddhist walking into a Catholic confessional and asking how many “Hail Marys” he ought to say. Surely there’s a Samaritan priest somewhere who can perform a similar purification ritual for him. But the Samaritan doesn’t go in that direction, either. He comes back to Jesus: and he does so “praising God.”

The Samaritan understands that what he’s just experienced, at the hand of Jesus, is more than a medical marvel. Alone among those ten lepers, this man understands something about who Jesus is.

This is not, fundamentally, a story about giving thanks. It’s a story about discovering and confessing that Jesus is the son of God, the one through whom the power of God flows. When Jesus chides the other nine for not returning, it’s not because he feels personally slighted. It’s not because he was looking for a thank-you note. It’s because only *this* man — this unbeliever, according to conventional wisdom — has realized that his healing is an act of God. Jesus doesn’t say of the nine, “Was none of them found to return and say *thank you*, except this foreigner?” No, what he actually says is, “Was none of them found to return and give praise to God...?”

Lots of times — admit it — you and I aren’t all that good at giving credit where credit is due. When things go badly in our lives, we’re quick to fall on our knees in prayer, imploring God for assistance. Yet when things go well: that’s a

differen't story, isn't it? Much of the time, you and I are all too happy to take the credit.

When things go badly, God gets the blame: "Why, oh why did you let this happen to me, O God?" But when things go well: "I'd like to thank the Academy for this coveted award..."

So, I think we can read this story as an example of how important it is to praise God, in season and out of season, in good times and in bad.

But there's something else this story teaches: a powerful lesson that's easy to miss, because it arises from a single, obscure detail (one you too may miss, if you read it too quickly). Let's go back and see what that detail is...

Ten lepers come up to Jesus, begging "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" The Lord responds instantly: "Go and show yourselves to the priests." He doesn't touch them. He doesn't pray over them. He doesn't make a healing poultice of mud with his own saliva – as he does elsewhere, healing a blind man. He doesn't even announce (as he does in so many similar incidents), "Your faith has made you well, go in peace." No, Jesus simply says, "Go to the priests."

What's even more remarkable, all ten get up and go. Even the Samaritan. They do so *even though they've not yet been healed*. And how do we know they haven't been healed? Because Luke tells us: "*as they went, they were made clean.*"

What faith these ten demonstrate! So convinced are they of Jesus' power to heal, they set off to perform the purification-ritual even *before* they've seen the sores on their arms and legs dry up, and their wasted limbs become whole. For them, healing is not instantaneous: it's a process, a journey they must undertake. With the first step along the road, they're on their way.

There are some who hesitate before beginning such a journey. They want to see some tangible proof before they take a single step along the road. They want to know in advance if the journey's going to be worth the effort. The tragedy would have been if, in the case of these ten, they didn't begin the journey at all: if they didn't immediately claim their healing, even before it took place.

That leads me to think of those several high-school classmates of mine whom everyone picked on. Somehow, these individuals — so marginalized by their teenage culture — discovered the power within themselves to put one foot in front of the other, and claim the healing that was already theirs. These were beautiful people. They were (and are) children of God — their peers just didn't know it at the time. But, courageously and in faith, they set out on life's journey. *And as they went, they were made clean.*

I think the lesson pertains to all sorts of people: even those who tend to be at ease in most social situations. When faced with a really big problem — one that

can't be solved with a single giant step, but can only be addressed by a long series of baby steps — there's no assurance that taking those first tiny steps will make any difference. It's always a leap of faith.

You've heard the old proverb. Fill in the blank: "Great journeys begin with.... *a single step.*" That's the way it was for a certain ten lepers, in the borderlands between Galilee and Samaria. That's the way it is, also, for anyone who's ever tried to beat an addiction, or heal a broken marriage, or learn to forgive someone who seems unforgivable. Change like that doesn't just happen, instantaneously. It's a process — one that begins with the proverbial single step. How true it is: the most important step is the first: the one taken in the absence of all evidence, without proof of success to come. It's the step that's based solely on faith: trusting a power beyond ourselves to help us accomplish what we could never do on our own.

I can remember hearing, once, from a swimming teacher about how difficult it is to teach four-year-olds to swim. He realized, on his very first day of work, how terrifying it is for a little one to go from standing on the side of the pool, shivering in a towel, to floating in the water (let alone swimming).

The only way to do it is gradually. The teacher knew to support young children in his arms, slowly bending his knees until the kids discover the property

of buoyancy: that they can indeed trust the water to hold them up if they position their body just so. Yet, without a teacher – without someone to take them from point A to point B, whispering to them all the while that it’s going to be all right, it’s almost impossible. For all the folklore about the “sink or swim” method — tossing them into the water and just waiting for them to get it — it almost never happens that way.

So, too, with any journey of healing or recovery: as trite as it may sound to say it, the only way to get anywhere is one step at a time. And the most important step of all is the first. That’s the risk, the challenge – the *leap* – of faith.

Jesus says to us, “Go.” He doesn’t tell us what the journey will look like: what awaits us around each turn. He just says, “It’s time to get started.”

In the words of Episcopal preacher and writer Tom Ehrich,

“Following Jesus isn’t about attaining a specific, measurable goal, or grasping a finite, literal truth. Following Jesus is about following. It is about movement. It is about days that haven’t happened, people one hasn’t met, places one hasn’t gone, and forgiveness one hasn’t requested — not yet.

Following Jesus starts wherever it starts but then goes on to the edge and around the corner. Clinging to the “hour I first believed” is never enough. Telling yesterday’s story and polishing yesterday’s truth are never enough.

Faith is a journey. It takes us beyond memory, beyond understanding, beyond comfort, beyond control. Faith is about a

road, not a specific place on the road.” [Tom Ehrich, *On a Journey* e-newsletter, June 24, 2004]

So, I invite you today: whatever it is you know you have to do in your life, whatever healing you need to claim, whatever great enterprise you must begin, begin it now. Don't wait for an opportune time. Know that the circumstances for starting out on this journey will never be ideal. You will not be healed before you begin; you will be healed as you travel: one step at a time!

Let us pray:

**Healing God, we praise you for the Christ
who, without fear, met those with leprosy and gave them new life.**

**Touch us, caring Jesus:
take from our hearts
that fear which makes us keep our distance.**

**Touch us, caring Jesus,
to heal the greatest obstacle that confronts us:
that fear within ourselves.**

**Touch us, caring Jesus,
in those most secret places of our hearts,
where we most need to be healed.**

In your most holy name we pray. Amen.