

October 9, 2022 Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray. Holy God, your Word cannot be chained. So, reveal to us your truth. By it, inspire us to renewed faith, and through it, guide us to work for you. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 17, verses 11 through 19. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus’s feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

What does it mean to be healed? Probably the simplest answer is to be medically or physically healed. To have a disease and then be cured.

The question of healing – of what it means to be healed, I think, is deceptively simple.

You can be medically healed, but what about mentally healed or spiritually healed, when the markers of healing are not so black and white?

For myself, and I would guess many others, my understanding of healing has greatly changed with the pandemic. Covid is a disease. Its healing falls under the straightforward understanding of healing. To have covid and then be healed.

But as the pandemic has gone on and we continue to learn more and more about the coronavirus, many people who we deemed healed of covid have developed what researchers are calling ‘long covid’. Lasting side effects that we are still trying to make sense of and understand. Are folks with long covid then still healed?

And what does it mean to be healed from the vast toll this pandemic has taken on our mental health? It is as simple as being healed as soon as the world began to open up again? The depression and anxiety just left behind as soon as we walked out our door?

The marker of that healing is difficult to find.

Our gospel story today is one of healing. There are many healing stories in the gospels. Healing is a crucial part of Jesus’ ministry. It showed his glory as the Messiah, as God’s son. And it showed a glimpse of what the kingdom of God here on earth could look like – to be healed.

This particular healing story is only found in the gospel of Luke. It’s pretty straight forward.

Jesus is still on the road to Jerusalem. But here in our story he is on the border land between Samaria and Galilee.

Not in Judea, but in a space that has no home. A space that always remains on the outside.

And in this space that has no home, there are 10 men with skin diseases. Other biblical translations often say the men have leprosy. In the Hebrew bible and the New Testament the term leprosy is used as a general term for a wide variety of skin diseases. Not just what we would diagnose as Leprosy today.

It's hard to overstate just how isolated people with skin diseases were during this time and place. To be a leper was not only to suffer a physical illness, but to be cast out from your family and society. The blemishes that would appear on your skin from these diseases were a marker of ritual uncleanness so people suffering from skin diseases lived in a state of perpetual ritual impurity.

The disease was also thought to be a punishment for wrongdoing. Because of all this, they lived in total isolation. Forgotten and neglected. Disgusting and disgraceful to others.

And the reality is that these people often died from being forced out of their families to the borderlands, the space that has no home. Perfect for those thrown out of their own.

So as Jesus travels through the borderlands, 10 men with skin diseases come up to him and beg for mercy. They call him by his name. Jesus. They call him master.

They know him by his name. These men pushed out from society and living a life of suffering and neglect somehow know Jesus by his name. And call him master.

These 10 men are among only three characters in the gospel of Luke to call Jesus by his name. (The other two being the blind beggar and the penitent criminal.)

These 10 men also call Jesus 'master' – a title usually only reserved for his disciples. They recognize him. They see Jesus and speak up to Jesus, and in return Jesus sees them and hears them.

They do not ask to be healed, only for mercy. And Jesus does not heal them immediately. He does not tell them he is going to heal them. He tells them only to go and show themselves to the priests. Skin diseases were treated more ritually instead of medically.

So, if some did have a skin disease that was cured, they would have to go before the priest. The priest must determine if the sickness has been cured and they are no longer ritually unclean before they can reenter society.

Jesus tells these 10 men with skin diseases to go to the priest. And they obey him. They believe him. And on the way they are healed. This healing is medical, physical.

But it is also social. They are healed from the social isolation and marginalization this disease causes. They can go back home to their families. Hug their loved ones.

Their humanity and life are restored. They are healed.

And so, once recognizing this healing, one man turned around. One came back to thank Jesus. He got down on his knees before Jesus giving thanks. This man was a Samaritan. An enemy of the Jewish people. Samaritans were heretics, despised. Thus, this Samaritan was doubly outcast. Not only a leper but also a Samaritan.

The other 9 men are presumably Jews, and they don't turn back.

Only the foreigner, the enemy, comes back to give thanks. And in response, Jesus says your faith has made you well.

What does this mean? The Samaritan has already been physically healed, socially restored, given his life back. What does Jesus mean that his faith has made him well?

Here's where the beauty of this story emerges. Because it challenges us to examine what is healing.

Your faith has made you well. This can also be translated as your faith has saved you, or even your faith has made you whole. The bible uses the concepts of wellness, wholeness, almost interchangeably.

To be made well...it means so much more than just physical healing. It's important to note that it is not his faith or gratitude that cured his skin disease. The gift of healing is not contingent on faith. All the lepers find themselves healed as they go to the priest

But it's the response to this healing that has made this outcast, this enemy, this Samaritan, well and whole. And his response is thanksgiving.

The Samaritan *turns back* when he sees he has been healed. The action of turning, to 'turn' holds vast theological meaning.

As Margit Ernst-Habib writes,

“In Luke, as in the New Testament in general, ‘turning around’ as a description for the believer’s reaction to Jesus’ work is certainly no accidental action but filled with deep theological meaning. It describes a movement of the whole person, initiated by God’s graceful work, a redirection of orientation toward God. Jesus’ words, ‘your faith has made you well,’ refer, therefore, not just to the medical healing the Samaritan has experienced, but to the holistic healing of this human being.”

The Samaritan turns back and gives thanks to God and thus is transformed. The faith that has healed the Samaritan, it's the action, the transformation. Everyone receives the healing grace of God. The person of faith is the one who is transformed through the reception of that gift by giving thanks.

We can often fall into the trap of thinking faith as being cause and effect, transactional. You pray for a specific thing, and it does or does not happen. But the healing of the Samaritan teaches us that to have faith is to live it, and to live it is to give thanks. It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith.

Healing is so much more than cause and effect. The depth and breadth of Christ's healing stretches far beyond into transformation. And the only response to this this transformation, to Christ's healing is gratitude.

It is the Samaritan's gratitude that Christ praises, that says makes him whole, saves him. Not that the details of his faith, of what he believes gave him the secret answer to salvation. No, Jesus seems to be saying something like your trust in me – in my power and words motivated action from you that transformed your life in a way that has experienced the salvation of God.

The Samaritan turned and was transformed and rooted his life this forward in thanksgiving.

My hope is, in this next stage of life emerging from the pandemic, or learning to live with the pandemic, is that to be healed is to see that living a life of faith is rooted in gratitude.

Because the somber reality is that in our world not everyone is healed. People have sicknesses that are not cured. Depression and anxiety are not so easily left behind. But this is not a reflection on your faith. It was not their faith that cured the 10 men. Christ's healing is a gift of grace to each of us.

But it is a healing that liberates us from the boundaries and limits of this world, liberates us from social and societal marginalization. From injustice – liberates us so we can walk in the way of Christ. And to see this, to grasp it in our hands – to be transformed by this healing we need only to give thanks. And keep giving thanks.

We should not forget that this transformation, a healing that makes us whole and well, it happens on the borderlands. In the space that is no one's home, in a space that is marginalized and dangerous. A space where people deemed unclean go because they have nowhere else to go. It's there that Christ heals.

And it's the unclean, impure, outcast enemy, that first sees Jesus. Speaks his name, and gives thanks for the healing that transforms.

What does it mean to be healed?

Sometimes I still don't really know. But I have faith that even when suffering abounds I can still see Christ and speak his name, I have faith that if I, we, live a life rooted in thanksgiving – we all, like the Samaritan, can see that our faith has made us well, whole and liberates us to walk in the way of Christ.

And for that, thanks be to God.