

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 17:11-19; Galatians 5:16-24

Faith, Gratitude, and Persisting in spite of Ingratitude

Our Holy Gospel teaches us about three important aspects of the Christian life today: about faith, gratitude, and stubborn Christian love, that is service even in the face of ingratitude.

All ten lepers today teach us about the nature of faith. It's important, as we consider the lesson before us, that we understand the background, what life was like for a leper at the time. Leprosy was a horrible disease, and still is in the third world. Believe it or not, there are about one hundred cases a year here even in the States, but they are mostly treatable. Many fear the swine flu approaching this Fall, but the swine flu is a cute little piglet compared to leprosy, especially leprosy in Jesus' day when there was no treatment and little understanding of it.

Leprosy is an infectious disease that often begins to show itself with unsightly skin lesions and then progresses to ravage one's nerves and disfigure one's body. Hands, legs, arms, and other extremities go numb, and at Jesus' time especially, often wither and rot away. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that the leper, through no fault of his or her own but on account of his or her sickness, became a social outcast, forced to live in a leper colony away from family and friends. Suffering a sickness is hard enough. Suffering it without those who love you, without any support, has to be nigh unbearable. But that is what the leper had to do. In fact, when anyone else uninfected with the disease came near a leper, he or she had to ring a bell or shout out, "Unclean, unclean." And that is what they were reduced to being: unclean outcasts, slowly rotting and dying on the fringe of society.

Such was the life of the ten lepers before us in the Holy Gospel, and that life had to be miserable. Yet one day they stumbled upon Jesus, or He stumbled upon them, and they dared to come close enough, though remaining at a distance, to shout to Him, "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*" And I can't help but imagine that those with Him recoiled at the sight of these unsightly men, that they perhaps averted their eyes and stepped away, but that is not what our Jesus did. No, He heard their prayer. He has a way of doing that, you know, hearing the prayer of the desperate, of those who throw themselves upon His mercy, who abandoned themselves upon His kindness.

These ten lepers are an example of faith. They saw Jesus rightly. They saw Him as compassionate, merciful, loving, kind, drawn down to heaven by His deep affection for our fallen human race, sympathetic with the suffering, Himself one who would suffer like none other in human history. Jesus did not recoil, did not turn away or turn a deaf ear to them. He called back and answered their prayer with His Word. He said, "*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*" And where there is a promise of God, their faith takes an iron grip, and they held onto His Words and we hear that they did just what He said.

They priests were the Center for Disease Control of Jesus' time in Judah. They declared one clean or unclean. It was God's loving Old Testament system for protecting His people from the spread of disease, and through many plagues and epidemics it has proven useful, as amazingly those who adhere to many of the Old Testament's proven principles of cleanliness, such as the Jews in the Middle Ages, have largely been spared infection. In fact, that's one of the reasons people in the Middle Ages wrongly suspected Jews of spreading the plague and sinfully persecuted them, because the Jews seemed immune to the sickness that was infecting the Christian and unbelieving population. But enough for that history lesson. The point is, that's why Jesus sent them to the priests, and the lepers would have known it.

So the lepers went. They trusted that Jesus was kind and good and loving and compassionate when they prayed, and they continued to trust He was the same, and that His Word was unwavering, as they turned to head to the priests. And they were healed. As Jesus tells the Samaritan, their faith, which was rooted squarely in nothing other than Jesus Himself, made them well, because their faith took hold of Jesus' deed and promise.

That brings us to the second thing we learn from our Holy Gospel, although in this case we don't draw a good example from all ten of the men healed on their way, but only from one, and that one a Samaritan. Remember, as we were reminded last week in the case of the Good Samaritan, that the Samaritans were viewed as second-rate Jews, both racially and religiously. They were from the north, and after the north was

conquered, their conquerors had initiated policies to insure they lost their identity to some extent, bringing in foreigners to resettle the land, with whom many over time intermarried. Yet the nine Jews who should have known best the debt of gratitude they owed our Lord Jesus, who were most likely much better catechized and equipped to offer the Lord thanks and praise, these are the very ones who disappear, having gotten what they wanted, forgetting what had been done for them, now done with the Lord, at least until they needed something else. And we see how this grieved our Lord, how it hurt Him, and not only because He wanted a “Thank you,” but because He knew that their ingratitude was a sign that their faith, like their flesh used to be, was withering, rotting, and dying.

Only the Samaritan came back, and He did what a Christian does when He recalls what Jesus has done for him or her. He worshipped the Christ. He gave Him thanks and praise. He attributed His new life to Him and was committed to living that new life in the light of what Jesus had done, in service to His Lord and Master.

Have you been grateful? Have you counted your blessings or rather listed what you think the Lord should have given you in addition or instead? Has your food hit your lips before thanks spilled over from your heart? Have your prayers, when you’ve said them, been more grumbling or expressions of gratitude?

St. Paul lists the symptoms of ingratitude in our second lesson. In fact, all sin is ingratitude, or misplaced gratitude, as well as misplaced faith, as we credit to God’s gifts what God Himself alone can give, or seek in the abuse of those gifts what can only truly and ultimately be found in His Son; for instance, in the abuse of His good gift of sex through sexual immorality, or of possessions through jealousy, or drink through drunkenness. These gifts of God are good and intended for our enjoyment, yet our ingratitude and selfishness perverts them instead for sin. Rather than employing them for not only our pleasure but God’s, our ingratitude and selfishness in essence turns these good gifts of God into gods themselves, so that we worship the gift instead of the giver. “*Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these,*” all of these things are nothing but signs that we’ve walked off with the nine instead of returning to the Lord with the Samaritan, that we’ve grieved Him. All of these are symptoms of a failure to take to heart all that God has done for us and given for us.

Yet what does Christ do when He encounters such ingratitude? He continues to love, serve, heal, and save. His ministry didn’t end with this day, but continued, even so far as Good Friday. Do you remember all the “Thank you”’s shouted at Him on that day? They’d be hard to remember, wouldn’t they? No, He was slandered, mocked, abused, derided, beaten, whipped, stripped, and yet never called things off, never decided we were not worth saving or that we were a lost cause, lost as we were in our trespasses and sins, but rather, knowing what was best for us even as we pined after what was worst for us, He persisted in stubborn love even in the face of ingratitude. And here we are today, because of Him, once His enemies but now His sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends through faith.

Trust that Christ is merciful and good, that He wants the best for you, and pray accordingly. Be grateful for all He has given for you and done for you, and is giving for you and doing for you, and will give to you and do for you. Take comfort from the fact that, in spite of our past ingratitude, He continues to bless us much more than we could ever deserve, that He has not withdrawn our daily bread or His free gift of eternal life to the repentant. Seek, in gratitude for that love, to do the same in your dealings with others, serving not for “Thank you”’s, though they are always nice, and Christ Himself was disappointed when He did not get one, but rather for the honest to goodness benefit of your neighbor, ungrateful as he or she might at the time be.

His encounter with Jesus changed the Samaritan. His life was never the same, and this new life began with worship and thankfulness to His God and Savior, to Jesus. May our encounters with Christ in His Word and Sacraments also continue to change us, and may our new life in Him begin again and again with worship and thankfulness to our God and Savior to Jesus. God grant us faith and gratitude like the Samaritan, and unwavering love, even in the face of ingratitude, like our Lord. Your God, your heavenly Father and His only-begotten Son, is good. Entrust yourself to His care. Give thanks to be in His care. Amen.