

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 17:11-9

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

A pastor recently told me that we are fortunate if we can keep our people to the third generation. Why? Because, unfortunately, with each generation there is often a degeneration in their appreciation for the gospel. They move from hot to the worst temperature of all: lukewarm. In the Revelation of St. John, Christ says to the Laodiceans, *“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold-- I am about to spit you out of my mouth”* (Revelation 3:15,16). In other words, you have become Christmas and Easter Christians, expecting Christ to be really impressed if you can make time for Him once a month. Today in our Holy Gospel we see the love and mercy of our Savior and we see the ungratefulness of mankind.

There was little more detestable to a Jew in Jesus time than a Samaritan. Good Jews were too good to even look at Samaritans. Fortunately for the Samaritans, there was one thing more detestable than them: lepers. Lepers were banished from society for fear that their disease would spread. They were left to cope with sickness and depression alone. As their limbs rotted and fell off, they sat rejected by family, friends, and the world in general. Whenever a clean, or healthy, person approached, they had to ring a bell and yell: “Unclean, unclean.” That was the lepers’ song, sung seemingly without end. Theirs was as sad a life as one could imagine, and there was little hope for improvement. Until...

“As Jesus entered a village he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’” Think what must have been going through their minds. Think of the courage this act took. Would Christ rebuke them for approaching Him while unclean? Would He ignore them? Would the disciples discipline them? Would this end in but another disappointment? They did not know what would happen. They acted in faith, clinging to the truth that the Christ was a man of mercy and they needed mercy more than most.

“Go and show yourselves to the priest,” Jesus said. Was He playing games with them? Why should they go and show themselves to the priest? That was what clean people did. These lepers were still as unclean as before. They were still lepers. They could still smell the stench of their rotting flesh. They still felt the horrible shame of being seen in public. Why go to the priest? To be mocked? To be punished? To be disappointed again?

Yet notice what they did. They acted by faith, and the very next thing St. Luke records is that they went and were cleansed. We see Christ’s mercy and power as He makes unclean men what they were originally created to be: clean.

Nine of these men were seemingly Jews. They were members of the Church of God at that time. They had gone to Sunday school catechism class. They knew the Common Service back and forth. Their grandpa had helped build the synagogue. Their parents were married there. Now Christ had personally reached out to them; and, well, the Lions must have been on after the healing, or deer season was beginning, or they had to work late the night before, because they just simply didn’t have the time or much use for Christ anymore—they had gotten what they wanted from Him—and how that must have broken our Lord’s heart.

“Thanks for baptizing little Bartholomew, Pastor, we’ll see you next Sunday.” The next Sunday never comes. *“We are so glad to have a new pastor, Pastor Johnston, and we are really planning to get serious about church again.”* Serious lasts for about a month. *“We’ll still be in church after we’re confirmed, Pastor. We won’t be the fifty percent that fall away.”* Then the gowns, special ceremony and certificate does its job and the graduation mentality sets in. *“I love*

my Bible Pastor. It's God's truth and what gets me through the day." Then God's Word says something inconvenient and it needs updating or a new interpretation. God's people are constantly tempted to become lukewarm and ungrateful for God's grace. Satan tirelessly seeks to make what is most amazing and important the thing we view most apathetically. But there are always some.

"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. And he was a Samaritan." This is the excitement of many of our converts to Lutheranism. They have learned the beauty and comfort of the gospel and have refused to let go of it. They hang on every word in Bible class. They hunger for the next sermon. They can't wait for communion Sundays. They chew on every part of the liturgy instead of kicking it into cruise for "the filler of the service," as some have irreverently dubbed the liturgy. Such was the case with the Samaritan. This outsider was overjoyed that the Messiah had stooped to have mercy on him. He marveled that his cry for mercy had been not only accepted, but answered. He had to get back to this Jesus as soon as possible to fall at His feet and thank Him. All this, and He had not even been baptized, absolved, catechized, confirmed, preached to, and communed. He had only been healed. Notice that I said, "he had only been healed." His healing was much less miraculous than what has happened to you week after week through Word and Sacrament, as God, on account of Christ, forgives our sins that we do not deserve to have forgiven.

Which leper will you be? Will something else be more pressing than feeding, singing, and confessing your faith next week, or will this be your priority? Will your gratefulness to your Savior spill over into the lives of your children as you bring them to Sunday school, or will you teach your children what is really important by leaving their education to the world? Will you grasp your Savior's legs all week as you live your "thank you," or will you live like you've never encountered the Christ? Will you be in church to find a forum for gossip and griping, or to rejoice with your fellow spiritual lepers and to praise the One who's made you well. As Jesus counts the number our baptized and compares it to our Sunday attendance, will He speak the sad words, *"Were not 345 cleansed? Where are the other 200? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except these?"*

But, fear not, Christ still has kind words for you. He has granted you faith through the Spirit and your faith is not idle. Yes, we must focus on our sins, but must also marvel at the fruits Christ has grown from the faith He planted in us. Last week you gave a door offering to the Ukrainian Lutheran Church beyond anything I expected. Many of you have been in Christian education classes and humble me with your zeal and your faithfulness. Many of you offer your time in service to this congregation even though your week is already packed. Many by faith overcome weekly obstacles I know nothing about. Many of you bring Christ to your families daily in how you deal with the challenges you face. More and more of you have come to God's service as of late, not because the new pastor is so great, but because your Savior's love has compelled you. You have done all these things because you are grateful, because Christ's mercy is not without effect. And by God's grace, I know your living "thank you" will continue as we enter the Advent season and focus on our Savior's gracious coming to us just as He once came to ten unworthy lepers. Today we have gathered to humbly cry to our Savior: Christ, have mercy on us. Will He have time for unclean sinners? Will He ignore our cry? No, it is for unclean sinners He came and gave His life. His reply is clear and unforgettable. May it ever be the fuel for our days, for He says, *"Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."*