

*“Easy” (part two)*

*Zephaniah 3:14-20; John 16:33*

August 29, 2021 – Homecoming Sunday

Several months ago, I became aware of something really big. Turns out, I’m a superhero. Well, I don’t know that I’d go that far as I’ve never quite been able to leap over a building in a single bound. I might not be a superhero, per se, but I do have one really special super power.

Y’all want to know what it is?

You see, whenever I get into a situation that I don’t know quite what to do about, I simply must do one easy thing and the problem before me will vanish, sometimes almost instantly. Wanna know what I do?

All I have to do is cry out, “Hey, Natalie!” and whatever problem I’ve got is quickly on the way out of the door. Natalie is so wonderful and able to accomplish far more than I am. I think I’ve told you about how flummoxed I was changing out some locks, right? Natalie got it done is about 1/10 of the time I’d wasted on the project. Why? Well, she read the instruction manual.

Seriously though, I am blessed to have Natalie in my life.

That is to say that I’m grateful.

Gratitude isn’t a difficult thing to summon, insofar as you recognize the need for it. But, how often I wonder, do we lack appreciation for the many, many kindnesses of our God.

Today’s Scripture reading isn’t likely to be new to you. It’s the story of the 10 lepers who seek healing from our Lord Jesus Christ.

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he 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." When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. 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. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

Y'all, I don't have any idea why I remember this. When it happened, I was somewhere around 5 years old. We were visiting Ohio at the time where my Mom had some really close friends who also had youngish families. We were celebrating in a basement with sweet treats and presents. I opened one of the presents and it was a helicopter toy. I was enthralled, perhaps I loved helicopters at the time, I don't remember. But my excitement wasn't just from the helicopter, I thought it could actually fly. When I discovered it didn't, well, ahem, I lost it. Angry and crying after finding out the thing was a pull-toy, I needed to be removed from my Mom.

Here I'd been given an amazing gift, and whether I could've controlled it or not at that age, my response was one completely devoid of gratitude.

Gratitude is a rather odd concept in the contemporary world. I think this is largely because its state of mind so foreign to our current thinking. Gratitude is the thankfulness we express in word or deed when we humbly acknowledge a gift's meaningfulness or necessity. You know what an antonym of grateful person might be?

An ingrate. That's not as big an insult as you might think. It basically means someone who isn't thankful for what they've received. Technically, to be an ingrate doesn't necessary imply willfulness in the action. That is to say, one could be seen as an ingrate if they simply forget to give thanks in an appropriate manner.

And so we come to today's Gospel lesson. Today, I'll read from the Gospel of Luke, the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter. A couple of things to keep in mind before we get to our reading. First of all, this particular pericope (which is just a fancy way of saying section but I like it because it sounds neat), comes during the central section of the Gospel of Luke. This lengthy portion runs the majority of chapters 9-17 and contains some very memorable teachings and parables. It's in this section we run into a host of parables which imaginatively capture all of the meaning and force of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. In fact, I've begun thinking of this as the Lukan equivalent. Sermon on the Mount in parable. For here we encounter - the Good

Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Great Banquet, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Persistent Widow, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

This passage also comes in the midst of some interesting instruction. Remember, we pastors typically examine one passage in isolation from the rest of the material leading up to it or right after it. Oftentimes, when looking to understand a particular passage, its helpful to locate it in its immediate context.

The immediate context of this particular passage is quite interesting. While a passage-only focus might lead you to make some pretty banal and sentimental comments about gratitude to God and could be rather pleasant. The actual flow of the narrative would go something like this.

First, temptation will come on this side of eternity and the concomitant need for Christians to be forgiving.

Second comes the disciples awareness that to do such a thing would require great faith in God.

Third comes a reflection on how servants are expected to behave and, let me just say this, entitlement isn't a part of that package.

Then comes the passage we'll read today about the 10 lepers

And, man do I wish the chapter ended there. It doesn't, so don't miss this. The chapter ends with a mini-apocalypse remembering some towns and times which wouldn't be that good a deal to have been hanging out in way back then.

Mentioned in this section about the Lord's wrath are none other than the days of Noah and the time that Lot was in Sodom.

The flow of the chapter condensed would go something like this, taken topically. Watch out for sin, it's bad and will get to you and everyone. Because sin will effect everyone, make sure to forgive lavishly and easily. Increase your faith for it can grow from the size of a mustard seed to enormity rather quickly. Make sure you serve the Lord gratefully, tirelessly and without need for ongoing approval. We are unworthy servants.

A story about a worthy servant in the Parable of the Prodigal Son offered as a contrast piece. Then a reminder that unworthy servants don't turn out so well with Jesus, looking ahead to the end of time saying, "They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed."

This flow is a great example of why reading the Bible can provide such added meaning. But there's also one little piece to this that may elude your awareness. The reason Samaritans were hated. Historically, Samaria was

populated largely with two different populations. First, the remnants of the Northern Kingdom. Remember, Israel split after Solomon and then the Northern Kingdom was destroyed, many of its inhabitants lost in the Diaspora. The remnant remained. Next, the Babylonians came and conquered and pulled most of the upper class into exile. That left the powerless and the poor. They stayed behind with many of them relocating into Samaria. These were the Samaritans, long lost brothers to the Jewish people. Cousins, in a way of thinking.

I've been really fortunate. I have never had a cousin I've disliked, let alone hated. I can't imagine how lousy those Christmas parties would be. But the Jews and the Samaritans were cousins that really didn't like each other. They were known to well, massacre each other if the mood struck and they certainly didn't hang out and watch baseball together.

Why then, you may wonder, was this group hanging out together? The simple answer, necessity.

Skin diseases back in those times were regarded with extreme fear because they were so viral. Leprosy, being the worst of the lot, so to speak, required ejection from one's society. That is to say that, in order to protect the vast group of people from potential infection, Lepers were sent to live on the furthest edge of whatever town they lived in.

This particular area, being on the border between the two nations, saw lepers conglomerate both Jews and Samaritans. What may have started out as an uneasy coalition, saw the unit develop some group cohesion. Notice it's all of them together that come out to see Jesus. And that makes sense, doesn't it. Really, division along any kind of line is a luxury. The only reason I could conceivably divorce myself from any group or individual is because I believe that what they provide can be replaced.

Which is quite easy to do in these modern times here in America where I can purchase anything I truly need. But in a place where you're cut off from most of your support? Well, you're going to need everyone's help in order to make it, whether they're a Jew or a Samaritan. That's exactly what likely happened with this Leper Colony.

Then, when they hear word about a miraculous healer. They start getting excited. Hearing that this Healer and His followers were in the area only amplifies their expectations. Then, the day comes. Can't you just see this sad and lifeless group positively bristling with energy.

Now, I'm going to change gears here just for a moment. I thought about an analogy to this energy. Have you ever bought a lottery ticket? And I don't mean the scratch offs. No, I mean the big boys, Powerball or MegaMillions. If you have and you've ever found yourself among other mathematically challenged folks

who've also bought a ticket? Invariably, lottery ticket buyers get to doing what? Thinking and talking about, "what they'd do with the money."

I've thought about winning the lottery off and on since I was a kid. I think it's a natural human reaction to the thought of receiving great wealth is to think first about immediate needs, then desires and then, OTHER PEOPLE. I've never heard someone not say that, if they win the lottery, they were going to be incredibly generous people.

And some are, no doubt. But, in looking at the data, its not hard to see those good ideas get pushed aside by the tide of instant wealth. We "see" this forgetfulness sometimes when lottery winners declare bankruptcy. They lost it all, so to speak. Many get caught up in a whirlwind of luxury, overspending and overcommitting. Personally, I don't happen to think these are bad people. They just forgot. Forgot what they'd likely promised – to be a good steward of that wealth and to help other people.

Have any of you ever played VR? Virtual Reality games. You know, where you put on some headgear that covers your eyes. Inside the mask, you're looking at artificial reality. You can move in real time and real space with the VR device changing what you see. For example, me and my son can play Ping Pong with those things on. And its pretty realistic. The feel of the paddle, the spin you can put on. IT's amazing.



They've only just begun with Virtual Reality. The thing is, in an artificial world, its awful easy to lose track of time. Once, playing a game on one of those things, I forgot to get something done that was important to my wife and that I'd promised to do. You know what, in that virtual world where I'd lost track of time, I totally blew it.

I can only shudder to imagine where Virtual Reality technology will be in 10 years. As the technology improves, it will gget harder and harder to remember our real reality when devices can provide us such an easy escape from our own lives.

I use that term virtual reality quite clearly. Vitual, meaning "almost or nearly as described."

With that description, one might rightfully see in this parable two realities once Jesus healed them all. There was, in an instant, real life returned for these men. 9 of them found that healing sufficient to return them to their homes and their wives and their families. I'm sure they were grateful to Jesus but, well, you know, they're more pressing things to do. Been gone for so long from their families, I'm sure there were duties and obligations aplenty to return to. To say noting of recreation. While not as dominant a category back then, people did relax and do things. These men were likely no exception. Remember how good it feels to get back on the golf course after a long, forced-time away?

So nine of these healed lepers do what most people would do having been forced into exile for a period of time – re-integrate back into their old lives.

After nearly 15 years in pastoring, I can tell you, I've seen this dynamic happen on more occasions than I care to remember.

I remember a young man, struggling with a video game addiction, found in the church a reason to cut the cord. Once he'd gotten that under control, his church commitments slowly became a drag on his social life. Being a young man, he drifted back to his peers.

Another woman, struggling with a disease, made a pledge to move forward into something big, never forgetting her faith. Finding herself in remission, she plunged into that endeavor with gusto.

There are lots of stories like that, I'm afraid. People come into the church doors because they're hurting or depressed by life. Sometimes they come into a church's doors, find a hot mess of consumerism, black-and-white thinking, and precious little Bible. Not being healed, they wander out of our doors and start looking for another solution. And, while a quick salve might work over the short term, only the church can provide a feeling of unity of mind, body and soul within yourself and with other people.

Some come into healthier churches. They quickly attach, get whatever problem is vexing them straightened out and then, as a horse race announcer might

say, “they’re off!” Off back to a world filled with spinning lights and flashy trinkets. And, let’s face it. It’s easy to drift back.

Are these people inherently bad? Of course not. Have they missed something big? Yes.

Will they need encouragement to return? Absolutely.

So often, this passage is read as a treatise on simply gratitude. Be grateful for God, that’s good stuff, isn’t it. And while that’s certainly the intent of this particular parable, remember, it comes within a larger chapter, a larger book, a larger Bible that wonders something big?

What about the nine?

Where are they?

Well, we see here in our church sanctuary. Most aren’t here. And a great many of them, like our guests and visitors today at Homecoming, aren’t here because they’ve moved or they’ve married and found different churches to attend. These folks are not the lost, obviously. But what about the others?

What about – the ones who left over an argument that could’ve been settled more lovingly?

What about the ones who left because they got offended about something trivial?

What about the ones who left over previous leadership not doing what they wanted?

What about the ones who left their church family over theology, only never to get attached anywhere else?

What about the ones whose lives came into scandal and their phones stopped ringing?

What about the person who truly believes the church of Jesus Christ in ONLY a hot mess of hatred and conniving?

Because I am a hopeful man, I hope all of them are still out there, inclined to hear one important message.

COME BACK.

Whatever reason a person has for not being in church, it probably isn't nearly as good an claim as they'd think. But if the people of God blame them because they put on the VR glasses called life or, worse, tell them they're damned because they're not here? Well, few will return and the ones that do may be awful damaged. But it's the work of the church to find them and lovingly without coercion draw them HOME.

Church, let's start all wondering about the Nine who returned to their lives. Let's find them, reintegrate into their lives slowly and with love. And, then, when the time is right, let's do what I'm sure that this one leper who is praised by Jesus

did. Spend the rest of his life, going to those nine other men, saying something quite similar.

“COME BACK.”

May the members of Cook’s Memorial Presbyterian Church grow ever more comfortable with the same declaration – “COME BACK!”

In the name of the Fathe and the Son and the Holy Spirit.