

**“Thanksgiving for Life”**  
**Luke 17:11-19 & Ephesians 1:15-23**

Sermon by Jan Edmiston  
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To have leprosy in Jesus’ time was to lose your life. And you would lose your life in layers.

Whenever *we* lose something – whether it’s a much-loved person or a much-loved thing – our sorrow involves many layers of loss. Some of the layers are obvious and others become clear with time.

When I lost my parents, I not only lost my mother and my father. I lost my children’s grandparents. (another layer.) I lost the people who connected me with my hometown. (another layer) I lost the ability to eat my mother’s cooking again at Thanksgiving. (another layer)

A friend of mine lost her grandmother’s opal ring in college. It was an antique that her grandmother had given her for high school graduation. But the ring was stolen from my friend’s dorm room one day when she’d left it sitting on her desk with her door unlocked.

She lost the ring. But she also lost her innocence in terms of trusting her neighbors. (another layer) And she lost her grandmother’s faith in her. (another layer)

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To have leprosy in Jesus’ time was to lose your life in layers. And usually, you lost these layers forever. Leprosy was a permanent curse.

**First you were removed from your family** by command of the Torah.<sup>1</sup> Because you could not be close to other people, of course, you also lost the ability to work a trade, to earn an income. You were condemned to a beggar’s life.

**You lost your ability to worship God** according to the rules of your faith. No matter where they lived throughout Palestine, Jews in Jesus’ time were expected to make pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem at least three times each year.<sup>2</sup> But lepers were not allowed into the temple – except to go into a single northwest hall called “The Leper’s Chamber Court.”<sup>3</sup> More about that later.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 13-14 has extensive rules for dealing with lepers (or those with seemingly leprous conditions.) Included in this law is this: “He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Lev. 13:46)

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 16:16 states that “Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose; at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths.” See also: Mark 14:12-17 (Passover or festival of unleavened bread), Acts 2:1-5 (Pentecost or festival of weeks), John 7:2-14 (festival of booths).

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.bible-history.com/court-of-women/leper\\_s\\_chamber\\_court.html](http://www.bible-history.com/court-of-women/leper_s_chamber_court.html)

**You lost your reputation and your dignity.** People regarded leprosy not only as a medical condition, but also as God’s judgment. It was believed that you must have done something unspeakably vile to deserve such a curse.

And to make matters worse, you were required to shout, “Unclean! Unclean!” to warn others that they should keep their distance.<sup>4</sup> It was a humiliating and hopeless way to live.

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Lepers were removed from society and were invisible to the average citizen. But Luke’s gospel tells us that Jesus saw them. He could have kept walking, but Jesus saw them. And when he saw them he stopped and spoke to them: “Go and show yourselves to the priest.”

There was only one reason to go and show yourself to a priest, if you were a leper. You went to the temple – inside that northwest corner called “The Leper’s Chamber Court” – to have the priest testify that you were clean.

Of course, *true* lepers *never* went to see the priest.

If you had eczema, ringworm, psoriasis, or boils someone might accuse you of having leprosy, but those maladies clear up with time. True leprosy was incurable.

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The ten lepers living together in a village were united by a common burden. At least one was a Samaritan and we can assume that at least some of the others were Jews. Samaritans and Jews would never have lived together in the same village if they had a choice. But these lepers had no choice. They were bound together by their tragedy.

They lived in the region between Samaria and Galilee, and Jesus was passing through their village on his way to Jerusalem.

“*Go and show yourselves to the priest,*” he said, and in faith, they actually *went*.

Clearly they saw this Jesus as some sort of holy man. They’d called him “Master.”

And as they turned toward Jerusalem, at some point, they must have noticed that there were no more white lesions on their arms and legs, no more sores on their faces, no more aching in their fingers and toes.

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<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 13:45

And one of them stopped. One of them realized the depth and breadth of what had just happened. *They had just gotten their life back.* **THEY HAD JUST GOTTEN THEIR LIFE BACK.**

Not only did they have their clean skin . . .

- they could have their families back,
- they could work among other people,
- they could worship in the temple,
- they could next to someone and touch that person and never again have to warn them to keep their distance.

*Layer upon layer upon layer* – they had gotten their lives back.

One of the lepers turned back and fell at Jesus' feet and he thanked him and he praised the LORD loudly. And who could blame him?

**HE HAD GOTTEN HIS LIFE BACK** and he had to stop and thank the One who had made it possible.

What about the other nine? They too had received an enormous blessing. They had also been healed. But for whatever reason, they didn't think to thank Jesus – the one whose name they had called.

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This is a true story. We don't know exactly when or exactly where it happened. But this story is as true today as it was 2000 years ago.

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Not in the way we see leprosy. Leprosy today is called Hansen's Disease after the Norwegian doctor who discovered that it was caused not by sin but by bacteria.

This story is true in that most of us *still* fail to stop and fall to our knees and praise God and thank the One who gives us our lives.

One of the wonderful things about my work is that I witness miracles on a regular basis -- people getting their lives back, layer upon layer.

I remember a woman who was paralyzed by debt – a choking, sleep-depriving debt – who unexpectedly inherited enough money from a relative to cover everything. With a single, certified letter she got her life back.

I remember a family in chaos over the care of a chronically sick child. There was never enough time, enough energy for their two healthy children. There was no time or energy for romance. No vacations. Not even an uninterrupted night's sleep. Layer upon layer they had lost the life they'd hoped to have. But a friend of theirs from church had

connections with a facility that treated children with their child's illness. And when they went to find out more about the program, their hearts sank when they imagined how much it cost. At last, they'd found someone who could help treat their child, but they could not possibly afford it.

"You don't have to worry about that," the director said. There is a foundation that covers all the expenses. And we have an opening, so your son could come in starting tomorrow." Tomorrow. In a single conversation, they got their lives back.

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We can all name – quite easily – the moments when we received bad news, the moments when we lost something precious. We can recall with great detail those terrible moments.

But what about the moments when someone gave us *wonderful* news? What about the times when we survived a surgery, or we recovered a lost possession, or our loved ones returned safely, or the worst thing that could have happened did not happen?

Chances are (maybe even a 90% chance) that we forgot to thank the One who made it cosmically possible. Everyday people are healed and relationships are restored, but few of us stop and turn around and fall on our knees in thanksgiving.

In fact, many of us cannot even name those life-restoring times as easily as we can name the heart-breaking times. In this country, in this bounty, in this century – we have receive more blessings, more benefits, more life-restoring moments than we can begin to name. We just don't see them. They are invisible to us.

In those moments when we have cried out to Jesus – or to some other Great Power in the heavens: "Please God, have mercy on me, take this thing, help me, save me," we are calling out in faith.

Sometimes we receive back more than we need or deserve. But rarely do we thank God accordingly. (Again, I remind us during this stewardship season when we are asking everyone to consider what we will pledge to the church for 2006 – scripture tells us that *a faithful response* to the blessings we have received is to share 10% of what we have. And while that seems like an enormous amount – especially in light of the debts we tend to pile up, in light of the lifestyles we've decided we can't live without – this means God is telling us to keep 90% of what we have. A shocking thing.

Most of us don't give anything near 10%. But imagine the things we could do – the lives we could give back to others – if we all shared more of what we could share. Think about it. *We have no idea how rich we are.*

Of course, there are many prayers that do not result in the answers we want. We long for healing and it doesn't happen the way we want. We beg for mercy, and still

suffer. This is a mystery that I don't begin to understand. But I must believe, in faith, that there is a reason and a purpose in this life that will one day make some sense, if we still need for it to make sense.

God lives in this church and in our homes when we help give people their lives back. We do it in thanksgiving for what we have been given. It's the way we participate in the resurrection.

Consider today what God has given to you.

- if someone loves you,
- if *you* have someone to love,
- if you have a safe home,
- if you had breakfast this morning and the hope of lunch after worship today,
- if there is any part of your body that doesn't hurt,
- if you have work to do . . .

If we have any of these things, we are blessed. How will we respond?

Chances are that the nine lepers who found themselves healed on the way to the temple, were so overwhelmed that they weren't sure what to do first: run tell their families? Sprint to be the first to reach the priest? Both are understandable responses.

But wouldn't *the world* be different, wouldn't *our souls* be different if the first thing we did when something wondrous happened to us was to thank God with loud praise?!

It changes everything. And it empowers us to give life to someone else.

***Let us pray:***

***Holy and merciful and majestic God – you are the Source of all knowledge, you are the Great Physician. And you don't always promise to cure us, but you always promise to heal us, to “make us well.” Grant us full and thankful hearts as we enjoy the blessings of this week, and give us such faith that we might receive little resurrections and be an agent of resurrection in the world.***