

A Reflection on Boundaries, Faith, and Gratitude

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Jesus Healing Ten Lepers | James Tissot, 1886 | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US

In-Breaking of the Kingdom

The narrative of the Journey to Jerusalem (begun in Luke 9:51) returns; new characters are introduced – ten lepers – the disciples play no role in this story. For a brief moment the on-going theme of forming discipleship seemingly takes a backseat, as the accent is upon God’s mercy and salvation. Several commentators hold that this account marks a new turn in Luke’s telling of the gospel moving from an accent on discipleship to the larger theme of “Responding to the Kingdom” as the cleansing of lepers is taken as a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom.

This story is only in Luke. (While at first glance Mark 1:40-45 may appear parallel to our passage, it is considered parallel to Luke 5:12-16.) Culpepper notes that there are two instances of seeing that serve as lynchpins to the narrative:

- *And when he [Jesus] saw them* (v.14)
- *And one of them, realizing he had been healed* (v.15) – the word translated as “realizing” is *idōn* whose primary meaning is to literally “see” in a way that leads to insight and perception.

“Seeing” has already played a role in the Gospel according to Luke. Jesus blesses those who see and hear (especially 10:24). Strictly speaking, both references to seeing in this story are, strictly speaking, unnecessary to its telling – yet Luke uses the words. What is clear is that when Jesus sees their need, he responds to it. While the center of attention of the story is the miraculous healing, it is not the central event of the story. I would suggest the central event is when the one leper sees that he has been healed and recognizes that the healing was the work of God through Jesus. Both acts of seeing lead to “doing” or perhaps better said, to a response – a response of faith and of gratitude.

In returning to the journey narrative, the placement of the periscope is most appropriate since one would only expect to encounter lepers on the road. According to the Law, persons with a leprous disease were required to live “*outside the camp*” (Num 5:2-3) and cry out “*Unclean, unclean*” whenever anyone approached (Lev 13:45-56). The other details are realistic. Lepers tended to live in groups (2 Kings 7:3), they avoided contact with non-lepers (Luke 17:12; Num. 5:2), but they stayed near populated areas to beg for alms. Such was their life until a priest could certify healings (Lev. 14:2-32). Yet there are no OT occurrences of an Israelite being healed of leprosy.

The story of the grateful Samaritan leper evokes the OT story of the healing of Naaman, a foreigner who had suffered from leprosy (2 Kings 5:1–19). The reference seems clear given several common elements: the characterization of Naaman and the Samaritan as lepers and as foreigners, the Samaritan location, the communication from a distance, the delayed cleansing (after leaving the healer), the return of the healed leper, praise from the healed leper, and thanksgiving. The point of the periscope is both Christological and theological: the story underscores again the connection between Jesus and God’s prophets in the Scriptures, and it emphasizes that not only do Israelites receive the benefits of salvation, but foreigners do as well. In this way the reader is prepared for the next section of Luke when the references to the Kingdom of God are clear and direct.

Yet the account is more than a simple healing miracle. In the immediate context, the lesson of gratitude complements the parable of the unworthy servant (16:1-13) and reemphasizes the disciple’s duty to compassion and mercy as seen in the parable of the Good Samaritan: “*Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?*” He answered, *‘The one who treated him with mercy.’* Jesus said to him, *‘Go and do likewise.’*” (10:36-37). As in that parable, so too here, part of the lesson is that one can never repay God’s mercy, but one can respond to God’s mercy.

Boundaries

They stood at a distance from him¹³ and raised their voice, saying, “Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!”¹⁴ And when he saw them, he said, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” As they were going they were cleansed.¹⁵ And one of them, realizing he had been healed, returned, glorifying God in a loud voice;¹⁶ and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan.¹⁷ Jesus said in reply, “Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine?¹⁸ Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”

The telling of this encounter seems straight forward: (a) Jesus encounters a group of lepers on the road to Jerusalem, (b) they ask for his mercy, (c) they are cured, but (d) only one returns to thank Jesus and that one is a Samaritan. A simple miracle story, yes? A narrative about faith as the foundation of healing? Such simple summaries, even if true, miss several key aspects of the encounter and the chance to reflect further on our own life of faith in Jesus.

The account begins with Luke’s vague geographical reference which introduces a theme of boundaries. The attentive reader is reminded of the divided tribes of Israel. The ten northern tribes had revolted against the throne of David after the death of King Solomon (ca. 920 BC). These tribes were conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC with most of the Israelites killed or taken into exile. However, a few of them, who were so unimportant that nobody wanted them, were left in the north (that area called Samaria in the NT). 2 Kings 17:24 tells us that the conquering king forced people from five foreign cities/nations to settle in

Samaria. These foreigners inter-married with the Jews and they brought in the worship of their own gods. By Jesus' time, Samaritans were not considered true Israelites. They had perverted the race. They had perverted the religion. The northerners looked to Mt. Gerizim as the place to worship God, not Jerusalem. They interpreted the Torah differently than the Jews in the south. The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans were so great that some Jews would go miles out of their way to avoid walking on Samaritan territory.

As clear as this boundary is, so too does the account raise other boundaries. Where the first boundary was geo-political, the other boundary is leprosy whose medical, social and spiritual implications are made clear by the simple passage: "*They stood at a distance from him*" (v.12). The listeners of Luke's time (and ourselves as well) may have already begun to place the lepers in the category of the poor to whom the news of the kingdom is proclaimed. At this point the text does not tell us that one of the lepers is a Samaritan. The boundary of "other" or perhaps even "enemy" is not revealed until the end of the narrative.

The group of lepers that hails Jesus is composed of both Jews (Galileans) and Samaritans. The companionship of these usually bitter enemies indicates the desperation of their condition, which led them to depend on one another, letting boundaries fall to the wayside. Their mutual banishment from their native "camps" led them to band together as they mutually depended on charity for survival. Even as the narrative is pointing out boundaries, it also shows that some boundaries are set aside.

What about the rest of us? The Talmud teaches: "We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are." The faithfulness of the listeners (and ourselves) is also slowly revealed within this text. The truly faithful of God are those willing to cross boundaries, despite the way we perceive things, despite preconceptions about the "otherness" of those we encounter. The faithful cross such boundaries because of their faith/trust in God.

Faith

¹¹ *As he continued his journey to Jerusalem, he traveled through Samaria and Galilee.* ¹² *As he was entering a village, ten lepers met (him). They stood at a distance from him* ¹³ *and raised their voice, saying, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!"* ¹⁴ *And when he saw them, he said, "Go show yourselves to the priests."* *As they were going they were cleansed.* ¹⁵ *And one of them, realizing he had been healed, returned, glorifying God in a loud voice;* ¹⁶ *and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan.* ¹⁷ *Jesus said in reply, "Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine?"* ¹⁸ *Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?"* ¹⁹ *Then he said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you."*

"*Stand up and go; your faith has saved [sozo] you*" (v.19). Such are the words spoken to the Samaritan leper, the only one who returned and gave thanks to Jesus. *sozo* has as a basic meaning, "to rescue from danger and to restore to a former state of safety and well being." Thus it is translated with words like "save," "heal," "make whole," depending upon how the danger is understood. How are we to understand the use of *sozo* here in this verse?

If we take the meaning as "heal" or "make whole" then the question is raised as to the fate of the other nine. If one reads the text closely there is no clear statement or command from Jesus about healing the leprosy. Jesus simply commands them to *show themselves to the priest*, who acted as a kind of health inspector (Lev 14:2 ff). Was Jesus putting their faith to the test to act as though they had been cured? Was Jesus simply responding with divine graciousness to their plea: "*Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!*" Of course, there would be no need to show themselves to any priest unless they were in fact healed, or were healed on the way. If all ten were healed, then why would Jesus say that the Samaritan's faith has "healed" him? Were the others healed but without faith? Were they simply evidence to the priests of the breaking in of the reign of God in the person of Jesus? Did the leprosy return to the nine because they failed to return and give thanks to Jesus?

There are other questions that can be fairly read into the gaps of the story. When Jesus commanded them to go to the priests, where were the lepers headed. One might speculate that the nine Galilean lepers were headed to Jerusalem whereas the Samaritan leper would move away from Jerusalem towards Mt. Gerezim. What is clear is that the cure awoke within the Samaritan, the foreigner, a chord of gratitude. He did not wait to be certified fit to rejoin the community, but returned to Jesus when he saw that he was cured.

Has the Samaritan leper moved away from both locales and become a true worshipper echoing the experience of the Samaritan woman at the well in the 4th Chapter of John: *“Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him”* (John 4:21-23).

If the meaning of *sozo* is taken as “saved” as in having been given eternal life then other questions are raised. What about the other nine? Is this a story of 10 who were healed but only one who was saved? Did the other nine lack faith and thus were not saved? There is nothing in the account which would indicate that the nine lacked faith in God. In truth there is nothing that indicates they lacked gratitude. The nine are blessed and the Mosaic law is enjoined, but their response falls short of that of the Samaritan. But there is something different about the response of the Samaritan.

Green (*The Gospel of Luke*, 627) writes about the declaration, *“your faith has saved you”*:

Here, something more than healing must be intended, since (1) the efficacy of faith is mentioned and (2) all ten lepers experienced cleansing. The Samaritan was not only cleansed, but on account of faith gained something more – namely, insight into Jesus' role in the inbreaking kingdom. He is enabled to see and is thus enlightened, itself a metaphor for redemption.

The Samaritan was enabled to see the Messiah and so *“returned, glorifying God in a loud voice; and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.”* The writer Robert Barron puts it another way:

Christianity is, above all, a way of seeing. Everything else in Christian life flows from and circles around the transformation of vision. Christians see differently, and that is why their prayer, their worship, the action, their whole way of being in the world, as a distinctive accent and flavor. What unites figures as diverse as James Joyce, Caravaggio, John Milton, the architect of Chartres, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the later Bob Dylan is a peculiar and distinctive take on things, a style, a way, which flows finally from Jesus of Nazareth.

Origen of Alexandria once remarked that holiness is seeing with the eyes of Christ. Teilhard de Chardin said with great passion that his mission as a Christian thinker was to help people see, and Thomas Aquinas said that the ultimate goal of the Christian life is a “beatific vision,” an act of seeing.

Perhaps this encounter on the road to Jerusalem relates the typical pattern of God's activities throughout scriptures – namely, God acts first. God did not tell the Israelites in Egypt, “If you only had enough faith, I would lead you to the promised land.” God led them out of slavery to Canaan. God did not tell us, “If you only had enough faith, I would send Jesus to suffer and die for your sins.” It was because we had no faith that he sent us Jesus. As Paul writes in Romans 5:8: *“But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”* God doesn't wait for us to have enough faith. God acts first. Then our proper response to God's actions is praise and thanksgiving because we have accepted the gift of seeing God's hand in what has happened.¹

¹ In a small way, this encounter highlights a recurring theme in Luke. The story foreshadows Paul's final words in *Acts*, citing Isaiah 69-10, addressing the faith of foreigners and the blindness of Israel: ²⁵ ... *Paul made one final statement. ‘Well did the holy Spirit speak to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah, saying: ²⁶ ‘Go to this people and say: You shall indeed hear but not understand. You shall indeed look but never see. ²⁷ Gross is the heart of this people; they will not hear with their ears; they*

It is highly possible that the other nine may have attributed their healings to God. However, they didn't make the connection between God and Jesus of Nazareth. The nine may have been praising God during their whole journey to the temple. Yet the one saw what could only be seen through the eyes of faith: that Jesus is the power of God. This is but a prelude to asking that we see and believe that the dying Jesus is the power of God.

The response of the nine raises a good question: can't God be praised everywhere? Yes.... but the story seems to be telling us that praising God and thanking Jesus should go together. In our story, the place to praise God is at the feet of Jesus. Faith, beyond being a response of thanksgiving, is seeing the connection between praising God and worshiping and thanking Jesus. The word for “thanks” is *eucharisteo* – the word Luke uses for his narrative of the institution of the Eucharist. A Catholic perspective from this story is that praising God and thanking Jesus is done, more fully, more completely, in our worship of the Mass, where our worship, praise and thanksgiving is done because we are gifted with seeing Jesus in the Eucharist.

Gratitude

The Samaritan *fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him*. Some might argue that it reads too much into the posture to say that it is an act of worship (although I think that is a fair reading of Luke) – but in any event, is it an act of humility. St. Bonaventure, sometimes referred to as the second founder of the Franciscan friars, wrote in his work *The Tree of Life* that humility is the guardian and gateway of all the other virtues and that gratitude is its first evidence.

While it is easy to become focused on the miracle, perhaps the more important lesson is the response from one who has been touched with God's mercy.² Among the lepers there is the one, the Samaritan, who recognizes that God has acted through Jesus and thus he glorifies God (v.15). Glorifying God is a common response to manifestations of God's saving work in Luke (2:20; 5:25-26; 7:16; 13:13; 18:4; 23:47) – and so returns to Jesus in gratitude. Gratitude may be the purest measure of one's character and spiritual condition. The absence of the ability to be grateful reveals something also – perhaps a high degree of self-centeredness or a sense that we deserve more than we have received – thus there is no need to be grateful.

Culpepper (*Luke*, 328) writes:

This story also challenges us to regard gratitude as an expression of faith. At the end, Jesus says to the Samaritan, “You faith has saved you.” That faith was expressed not primarily in the leper's collective cry for help, but in the Samaritan's act of recognition and cry of grateful praise. Only his “loud voice” of praise matched the leper's raised voices to call out for help at the beginning of the story.

In what sense, then, is gratitude an expression of faith? Does gratitude follow from faith? Or is gratitude itself an expression of faith? If gratitude reveals humility of spirit and a sensitivity to the grace of God in one's life, then is there any better measure of faith than wonder and thankfulness before what one perceives as unmerited expressions of love and kindness from God and from others? Are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay, and for which we often fail to be grateful? Here is a

have closed their eyes, so they may not see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them.’ ” (Acts 28:25-27). Paul's final words reflect a major concern of Luke's writings: how the salvation promised in the Old Testament, accomplished by Jesus, and offered first to Israel (Acts 13:26), has now been offered to and accepted by the Gentiles.

² The lepers call out *eleēsōn hema* which the NAB translates as “have pity on us.” Virtually all other modern translations translate the passage as “have mercy on us,” given that the primary meaning of *eleēō* is “to show mercy.”

barometer of spiritual health: If gratitude is not synonymous with faith, neither response to God is separable from the other. Faith, like gratitude, is our response to the grace of God as we have experienced it. For those who have become aware of God's grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper.

Notes

Luke 17:11 *his journey to Jerusalem, he traveled through Samaria and Galilee*: the expression *diameson* ("through" in our translation) is literally "in the middle of" - strictly speaking there is no region between Samaria and Galilee. Since Galilee lay above Samaria, Jesus may have traveled near the border between the two regions as he made his way down to the Jordan to skirt around Samaria. In any case, the geographical reference is vague at best.

Luke 17:12 *lepers*: literally *leprós andres*, scabby men. The adjective *leprós* (from the verb root meaning "to scale or peel off") has the sense of "scaly," "scabby," "not smooth on the surface." It can be used to describe uneven and stony ground, but also of leprosy, in which the skin becomes rough and scabby. The related noun *lépra* and its derivatives etc. are used only for leprosy. The LXX uses *lépra* for צִרְעָה, which is found especially in Leviticus 13 ff, or נִגַע־צִרְעָה, Lv. 13:20.

In the NT *lépra* and *leprós* refer to the same ailment, or group of ailments, as the words denote in the OT or LXX. This is shown by the reference to the OT in Luke 4:27; Mt. 11:5 and parallels, and to the OT ritual of purification in Mk. 1:44 (Luke 17:14). Whether this sickness is what we now call leprosy may be questioned. But the precise medical identification of the disease does not affect our estimation of the accounts of healing. If the tradition emphasizes particularly that Jesus healed lepers, this is linked with the fact that Judaism expected the removal of this affliction in the time of Messianic salvation, cf. the reply of Jesus to the Baptist in Mt. 11:5 and the power given to the disciples in Mt. 10:8. Accounts of such healings are to be found in Mk. 1:40 ff. and parallels as well as Luke 17:12 ff. (cf. also Mt. 10:8). [TDNT]

Luke 17:13 *Master! Have pity on us!*: This is the only time Jesus is called "master" (*epistátēs*) by someone not a disciple. The lepers call out for *eleēō* which the majority of modern commentaries translate as mercy from *eleēō*, to show mercy.

Luke 17:14 *Go show yourselves to the priests*: The command to the lepers is the same as the first healing of lepers in Luke 5:14: "*Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.*" This is a reference to Lev 14:2–9 that gives detailed instructions for the purification of one who had been a victim of leprosy and thereby excluded from contact with others (see Lev 13:45–46, 49; Numbers 5:2–3). In Luke 5 (and its parallel in Matthew 8:4, the expression *that will be proof for them*: in the Greek can also mean "that will be proof against them." Although that added phrase is lacking in our text, given the rising conflict with the Pharisees in the text leading up to Luke 17, one would be justified in understanding such an echo and accusation.

Luke 17:15 *glorifying God in a loud voice*: Throughout Luke-Acts this is held as the proper response to the working of a miracle (5:25–26; 7:16; 13:13; 18:43; Acts 4:21; 11:18; 13:48)

Luke 17:16 *he fell at the feet of Jesus*: Luke also uses such acts of prostration as a proper response (5:12; 7:38; 8:35, 41; 10:39) to God's gracious intervention

and thanked him: What is unusual in this verse is the presence of *eucháristōn*. This forms a triptych: giving glory to God, taking a posture of submission (or worship?) and then thanking the one who is the object of the glory and worship.

He was a Samaritan: In the parable of the Good Samaritan the foreigner is the example of Godly love and mercy. Here the Samaritan is the foreigner who is the exemplar of faith.

Luke 17:17 foreigner: This is the only place in the NT that the word *allogenés* is used. The same word was used in an inscription in the temple in Jerusalem: “no foreigner is to enter.” The same word was used in the Septuagint in laws that forbade outsiders from coming near the tabernacle, with a penalty of death for those who did (Numbers 1:51; 3:10, 38; 16:40; 18:4, 7; Ezekiel 44:7, 9).

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