October 13, 2013 – 21st Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)

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In today's Gospel, we find yet another story about faith. I don't know about you, but I'm sensing a theme here in Luke, as Jesus heads toward Jerusalem. Today's story is a fairly standard leper healing, which Jesus had done before, along with many other kinds of healing, but this one comes with a couple of twists.

The first unusual thing is that it takes place in the region between Samaria and Galilee. This is strange because there IS no region between Samaria and Galilee. The two regions share a border, so what Luke is describing here is a kind of no man's land, perhaps where people who are outside of society live.

Then, when Jesus entered the village, he was greeted from a ways away by 10 lepers. That's a lot of lepers, living in one place, which makes one think that this is an actual leper colony and the only people left there were those lepers. It's kind of a creepy image – an abandoned village, peopled only by folks who have this hideous, disfiguring disease.

I remember being really surprised when I heard that leprosy is actually curable today. Now it's called Hansen's Disease, and it's just a bacterial infection, although a fairly nasty one. As such, it's treatable with a specific group of antibiotics. Left untreated, though, which still happens in poor countries like India, it does cause the skin lesions and secondary infections that made it so frightening in the past.

But back to our ten lepers. Even in their isolation, and even at a distance, they recognize Jesus' power to heal them, and they cry out to him for mercy.

According to Jewish law, in order for a leper to be considered cured, no matter the miraculous source of his healing, he had to present himself to a priest to be ritually cleansed. Only then could he rejoin the community and take part in worship. So Jesus sending them off to the priest would not be unusual. It's not even unprecedented in Luke – he told the same thing to a leper he cured in chapter 5.

Some people might say that it was pretty disrespectful for the men to run off to a priest without even stopping to acknowledge Jesus. Even Jesus' own words would seem to support that because when one of them had a change of heart and returned, he asked him why the other nine hadn't come with him.

I don't know why Jesus would say such a thing. He didn't say anything at the healing earlier in Luke – he didn't bat an eye when that person left to do what he said. Why would he complain about it now?

Maybe it had something to do with the tenth leper, the one who turned back. This story, although it seems to be describing an event that happened on the road to Jerusalem, is really more of a parable that speaks to something greater than just healing, extraordinary as this event seems to be.

The text says, "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan."

There's a lot packed into those few sentences. First of all, he SAW that he was healed. It doesn't say if the others saw it or not, but since it happened while they were on the move, perhaps they didn't notice it right away, but the tenth guy noticed that he had been healed and it caused him to turn back.

Then, as he was returning to Jesus, he started praising God with a loud voice. Maybe he was excited – you know how your voice rises when you get really stoked about something – or maybe he wanted Jesus to hear it from a ways off. And then, when he actually caught up to Jesus, he fell at his feet and thanked him. And oh, by the way, he was a Samaritan.

This man was doubly ostracized. First because he was a leper. This would have gotten him driven out of his home town in Samaria, wherever that was, and kept him from entering any town on either side of the border. So he ended up in this deserted village in no man's land in the company of others both like him and unlike him.

Then, he would have been ostracized because he was a Samaritan. Samaritans, although they were descended from two of the twelve tribes of Israel, were in no way acceptable to Jews. They were unclean, and to be kept away from at all costs. Maybe the other lepers allowed him to join them because they were all unclean anyway, or maybe they didn't know he was a Samaritan, but he would definitely not have been welcomed at a priest's house, and thus would not have been considered cured by their standards.

So he turns back. He leaves his former community, such as it was, and turns back to Jesus. And as he turns back, he praises God for his deliverance. At the end of this passage, Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well. The word that is translated "made well" is *sodzo*." This word has a much bigger meaning than just to heal. It also means to save, preserve, or protect. It's the word from which we get "soteriology," which is the study of salvation.

In other words, this Samaritan's faith has saved him. He was already healed, which caused him to turn around, but in turning around, in turning to Jesus, he found salvation as well.

I think this is the point Luke is trying to make with this story. The nine lepers did nothing wrong in following Jesus instructions to go to a priest and be made ritually clean. And they were healed even though they didn't acknowledge Jesus' role in that healing. They followed the letter of the law of their religion.

But Jesus wants so much more from us. He wants our hearts. He wants our gratitude. He wants our love. He wants us to turn away from a religion of habit, or even tradition, and turn TOWARDS the living God. This doesn't necessarily mean leaving the Church, or at least I hope it doesn't. But it does mean bringing new enthusiasm and new life into our old ways of doing things.

And the place to start is right here. In a couple of minutes we will start our celebration of the Eucharist, with the long prayer that we call the Great Thanksgiving. The Gospel says that the Samaritan fell at Jesus' feet and gave thanks. The Greek word for thanksgiving is "*eucharisteó*." As we pray the Great Thanksgiving together, think of throwing yourselves at Jesus' feet and thanking him directly for all that he has done for you.

Then as you kneel at the altar rail, think of our community being all together, praising and thanking God as one body. No one is excluded, no one is ostracized, no one is alone. It's then, when we are closest to God and to each other, that we will experience our faith, both as individuals and as one Body, which will always save us and, no matter what our circumstances, will make us whole.

Turn towards that salvation and healing today, and give thanks to the Lord our God.

Amen.