

Luke 17:11-19: **Made Well**

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Happy Thanksgiving! Which is tomorrow, for the Canadians among us. Fittingly, we're going to hear a gospel story about giving thanks, among other things. Listen with me for God's word to us from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 17.

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, 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 made clean.

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.

Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Now that you've got that whole story in your minds, we'll go back through a line or two at a time, and I'll offer an "illuminated reading" of the text. This would be a good day to open a Bible to Luke chapter 17 and follow along as we read. I hope this invites us deeper into the vivid world of the scripture. Nearly every line of this Jesus story overflows with imagery of meaning and hope. So here we go, starting in verse 11.

On the way to Jerusalem

Back in Luke chapter 9 Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem" (9:53). Luke frames a large part of Jesus' ministry in the context of moving toward Jerusalem, where his mission will climax. Jerusalem houses the Temple, of course, the center of Israel's worshiping life. But Jerusalem also holds vulnerability — it's got a dark side. In Luke 13 Jesus laments, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it" (13:34).

Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

Galilee is the area around the Sea of Galilee, in the north of Israel. Jesus preached and healed in many of those towns: Capernaum, Bethsaida, Cana, Nazareth where Jesus grew up.

Samaria, to the south and west, was home to Samaritans. Observant Jews of Jesus' time rejected the Samaritans as inferior, as people who had intermarried with Assyrians and other foreigners. They also labeled them heretics because they worshiped God differently, and not in Jerusalem. For modern analogies you might think of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Sunni and Shia factions of Islam, or many mutually hostile racial and religious divisions here in the US.

As Jesus traveled south from Galilee toward Jerusalem, he would have to go through or near Samaria. So he's in a borderland here, a liminal space where it's

possible to encounter someone truly different. More than once in the gospels we're reminded that Jesus was sent not only to his own people, not only to the insiders. And the writer of Luke gets it: every time a Samaritan is mentioned in Luke, that person is shown in a positive light. Remember Jesus' parable about the Samaritan who loved his foreign neighbor?

As [Jesus] entered a village, ten lepers approached him.

The lepers are outside the village. Leprosy in biblical times could mean all sorts of skin diseases, from acne or mild psoriasis to what we now call Hansen's disease which can be crippling. But people were terrified of catching diseases, and Hebrew scripture laid out elaborate laws that quarantined lepers away from normal society. A resident of Galilee or Samaria would work hard to avoid touching even the shadow cast by a leper, for fear of contagion.

If these lepers did suffer from Hansen's disease, it could be brutal, back before antibiotic cures became possible. The leprosy bacteria can "kill nerve endings and sabotage the body's systems and [its] mechanisms for self-protection."¹

Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

In the painting on your bulletin cover, notice the lepers carrying bells and noisemakers to warn people away.² As the law of Moses says in Leviticus 13:45-46, Anyone with an infection or skin disease must wear torn clothes, dishevel their hair, cover their upper lip, and shout out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' They will be unclean as long as they are infected. They are unclean. They must live alone outside the camp.



¹ Harmon, Chelsea. "Luke 17:11-19 Commentary for Sunday, October 12, 2025." Center for Excellence in Preaching website: <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-10-06/luke-17-11-19/>

² Chelsea Harmon shares and describes the *Ten Lepers* painting by James C. Christensen in her commentary. For that and more, I'm indebted to her thoughtfulness about this text.

So these lepers have learned to segregate themselves from healthy people, a physical and spiritual exclusion forced on them through repeated experiences of shame and humiliation and fear. Imagine the self-hatred one might cultivate. But from a distance the lepers beg travelers for some charity. And apparently these outcasts have heard something about Jesus; they call him “Master.” In Luke, the only other people who call Jesus “Master” are his disciples.

When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

Ancient Jewish culture strongly linked physical and religious purity. Leviticus describes in detail how the priests must be arbiters of someone’s physical and spiritual fitness for the community: was the person deemed “clean”? Any former lepers would have to pass examination and perform sacrifices, as prescribed by the Mosaic law. By sending them to the priests, Jesus was restoring them to their families and communities. They ask Jesus for mercy, and this is how he grants it.

And as they went, they were made clean.

The Greek word here for “made clean” is the source of our English word catharsis: release of emotion, relief from guilt, cleaning out the mess. Also think of Naaman the Syrian in the Old Testament, who was cleansed of *his* leprosy through the simple act of washing in the Jordan River. His story, and this one, remind us that God’s healing may come to us stealthily, while we’re doing entirely normal things. Like bathing, or like walking down the road. In this story, “the actual healing is almost a sideline event. Jesus does it without fanfare.”³

But as they realize they’re healed, do you imagine this group looking at each other with astonishment, celebrating, running fast into town? Like in the painting.

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

All the healed lepers had faith enough to follow Jesus’ instructions, but at least one of the people is paying close attention. He *knows* in his body that something has *changed*, that he is whole again. And even though Jesus has sent him on a mission to see the priests, this man can’t stop himself from turning around. He starts yelling with praise and joy.

He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.

The man rushes back with unabashed thankfulness. And this time, *he doesn’t keep his distance*. After probably months or years of severe social ostracism, the now-healed man surely cannot wait to hug his child, eat a meal at home, go to work again. But empowered with newfound health and freedom, the man’s very first impulse is to toss himself lovingly into the personal space of the one who healed him. With Jesus he enjoys his first social contact.

And he was a Samaritan.

Wow. Another reason for turning back. Would Jewish priests even have granted this foreigner a hearing? Maybe he’d have to go to his own Samaritan priests. Which makes me wonder if the group of lepers had been a mix of Jews and

³ Long, Kimberly Bracken. “Luke 17:11-19: Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word — Year C, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. p. 164.

Samaritans, none of them welcomed among their own peoples. Sometimes shared suffering helps us overcome our animosities.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue and uses Naaman the Syrian as an example of God healing with power among foreigners, even though many in Israel also had skin diseases and were not healed. That comment is what makes the citizens of Nazareth want to throw Jesus off a cliff. But notice now that Jesus' healing extends to both Samaritan and Jew.⁴ As Paul will write, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus."

Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

How do you hear Jesus speaking these questions? Was he grumpy? Bemused? Ironic? Sad? Incredulous? Whatever tone of voice he might have used, he specially notes that the thankful man is a foreigner. That affirmation echoes Jesus' encounter with a Gentile centurion in Luke chapter 7. Jesus says of him, "Even in Israel I haven't found faith like this."

In both cases I hear Jesus saying, "Foreigners are faithfully celebrating God's saving love. What's up with my own people?"

Yesterday *The Guardian*, the UK newspaper, reported that in Villamalea, a small town in central Spain, the town council approved a motion "unanimously and across party lines, calling on the central government to push forward with a stalled proposal to [legalize] undocumented migrants in Spain." Villamalea's mayor, from a conservative political party, said, "To us, it was the most natural thing in the world.... It's not just economics, it's a question of humanity."⁵

The town knows that immigrants help their labor force stay vital, and they celebrate "a rich tapestry of residents whose roots trace back to 32 countries." Interfaith dialogue also contributes toward building relationships.

"There was a day when people who practise Islam went to the church and got to know the prayer space and then they did the reverse; the Catholics went to the mosque and experienced it," said the mayor. "And around two months later, the five religions we have in Villamalea came together to pray in the church."⁶

All ten lepers are made clean. This Samaritan, though, turns around and responds to Jesus in thanks and love. It's the start of a relationship across boundaries. Which is what faith looks like.

⁴ Dowd, Sharyn. "Luke 17:11-19: Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2, Chapters 12-24*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. p. 121.

⁵ Kassam, Ashifa. "'It's a question of humanity': how a small Spanish town made headlines over its immigration stance." *The Guardian*. 11 October 2025.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/11/small-spanish-town-headlines-immigration-villamalea>

⁶ Ibid.

Then [Jesus] said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

These can be dangerous words. Certainly you’ve heard the phrase “faith healing” — some people think that if you muster up enough faith you can be healed of anything. That’s a brutal teaching for the many people who pray wholeheartedly for healing and don’t receive it. Does that reveal someone’s lack of faith? Of course not.

The faith of the healed Samaritan doesn’t create his healing. He and all the others were healed earlier as they walked down the road. The man does nothing to earn it. Jesus poses no religious tests for this Samaritan “heretic.” Instead the man’s faith, the faith that Jesus affirms and blesses, is revealed in his...gratitude.

Theologian Shannon Craigo-Snell worships here at Highland, and she has a wonderful essay about this gospel text. Noting that the Samaritan seems to display deeper healing beyond his skin condition, Shannon writes:

Only one [of the ten] saw that what Jesus had done did not just mean that his own life would improve; rather, it meant something more. In the healing work of Jesus Christ, the love of God was both present and powerful. It reached beyond boundaries of clean and unclean, healthy and unhealthy, even Jew and Samaritan. Perhaps it was in recognizing this love, returning to Jesus, and praising God that the Samaritan was truly made well.⁷

For the Samaritan and for us, faith in the God of Jesus Christ says: Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you for tastes of abundance, and thank you for help during hardship. The faithful response to any act of grace is to give thanks and praise to God. In that deepest sense the healed man knew he was made whole: he acknowledged that his life and his health were gifts from God. What else can he do but break out in praise?

And *that* kind of faith, friends, is available to us whether we have received healing or not.

Thank you, God, for making me well.

Thank you, God, for sustaining me when I am not well.

Thank you, God, that in life and in death, we belong to no one but you.

Thank you, God, that all shall be well, that all shall be well, that all manner of things shall be well.⁸

In the name of the Maker, the Healer, and the Sustainer.

⁷ Craigo-Snell, Shannon. “Luke 17:11-19: Theological Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2, Chapters 12-24*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. p. 120.

⁸ This sentence is a famous saying by Julian of Norwich.