

## ***“A Tale of Two Lepers”***

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II Kings 5:1-15

Luke 17:11-19

The Old Testament story of Naaman the leper is one of my favorite stories because I see the gospel in the Old Testament through this story.

Naaman was a great leader among men, the commander of army of the Arameans. You might compare him to George Paton or “Storming” Norman or John Wayne. He had fought and won many battles and the King of Aram had complete confidence in Naaman. But there was one problem. This great general had leprosy. And the disease was ravaging Naaman’s body. Everything that could be done to cure the disease had been done for Naaman but to no avail. But Naaman’s wife had heard through her servant, a captive Israeli slave girl, that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure Naaman.

So Naaman let it be known to the King that he had heard through the grapevine that some prophet in Israel was known to have cured people of leprosy. The King ordered his five star general to take a letter to the King of Israel that directed the King of Israel to cure Naaman of his leprosy.

So Naaman took the letter, along with more silver, gold and fine linen than anyone had ever seen, straight to the King of Israel. When Israel’s King read the letter he nearly lost his mind, *“Holy, Toledo, I’m being set up. I’m not God! I can’t cure leprosy. Now when I am not able to cure Naaman’s leprosy, the King of Aram will have a great excuse to wipe us off the face of the earth.”* About that time, Elisha got word of the King’s predicament and took the burden off the King’s shoulders by inviting Naaman over to his home. Elisha wanted Naaman to experience the God of Israel.

So once again, Naaman and his entourage of soldiers, slaves and servants turned on their GPS and headed to Elisha’s home. When Naaman arrived, Elisha sent a messenger to greet him and instruct Naaman to go wash himself seven times in the Jordan River. The messenger told Naaman that if he did that he would be healed.

Now remember, Naaman used to sharing box seats with the King and being the center of attention in ticker tape parades. He was used to being respected, venerated and getting his way. After all he was one of the most powerful men of Aram! When Elisha didn't come out to personally greet him but, instead, sent a lowly servant to relay the message, Naaman was offended....he was furious! *"You mean I came all this way to be treated like a commoner? What do you mean go wash myself seven times in the Jordan River? We have much greater rivers in my country, why should I step into your puny little river? This is foolishness! I will not be insulted this way! This has been a waste of my valuable time! I'm out of here!"* Naaman was angry and I would imagine a little disappointed. Living with leprosy was a curse....and he had hoped....

But Naaman was genuinely loved by those who served him and they humbly coozied up to the general and gently suggested, *"Hey, we've come all this way. Why don't you give it a try? After all it is a rather simple request. You never can tell what might happen until you try it."* No doubt, Naaman was later quite grateful for those who cared enough for him that they would not allow his anger to sabotage a possible blessing.

So Naaman immersed himself seven times in the Jordan river and, like Elisha had told him, he came out of the water as the Bible states, ***"and he was clean."*** Naaman returned to Elisha and proclaimed his faith, ***"Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."*** (verse 15)

Naaman overcame his pride and, with humble faith, chose to step into a muddy river and wash himself seven times. His obedience to the word of the prophet led to his healing. A healing that not only resurrected his body but his soul as well! For Naaman recognized that there ***"is no God in all the earth except in Israel."***

This is a good news/gospel story in the Old Testament. The Word of God, through the prophet, comes to a seeker...one who is even a foreigner. The seeker struggles to accept the act of faith but finally, with the encouragement of friends, steps into the River Jordan and is covered in the baptismal waters of God's healing...not just physical healing but spiritual healing. Then, following Naaman's proclamation of faith, he offers a tangible gift as a symbol of his gratitude.... ***“please accept a present from your servant.”*** Naaman actually offers Elisha all of his silver, gold and linen but Elisha refuses Naaman's generous offer. Take time this week to read the rest of the story....it is spell binding!

*For what and for whom are you grateful? How do you show gratitude?  
How do you express thanks?*

Now we turn our attention to the New Testament story of a leper finding wholeness through Jesus Christ.

### **Luke 17:11-19**

***<sup>11</sup>On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, <sup>13</sup>they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” <sup>14</sup>When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. <sup>15</sup>Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup>He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup>Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? <sup>18</sup>Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” <sup>19</sup>Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”***

The story of the ten lepers is unique to Luke. In this story we catch a glimpse of the isolation and loneliness experienced by lepers in Jesus' day. They were required by Levitical law to keep their distance and have no contact with “clean” people. For instance.....

***<sup>45</sup>The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” <sup>46</sup>He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.***  
(Leviticus 13:45-46)

What a miserable existence! It's been said that one of the most horrible human experiences is to be shunned. To be cut off and separated “outside the camp.” These shunned individuals must have heard of Jesus' compassion and, while at a distance, pleaded for mercy. Jesus stops and engages with the ten and sends them on to the priest who held the “get out of leprosy” free card. As they were on their way they realized they had been healed. No longer would they be forced to live “outside the camp.”

But only one of ten recognized the astounding presence of God in the process of healing. Perhaps the other nine thought it was just “good luck” they were healed. Or maybe they were saying to themselves, “It's about time that God gave us something! It's about time we were given a new lease on life. Enough of that living hell.” But only one seems to look deeper than his new skin to acknowledge the touch of God in the healing. This one cleansed leper returns to Jesus thanking Jesus in a loud voice and prostrating himself before the One who made him whole.

Did you note the language in this story? All ten were “*made clean*” but only one, the one who returned with thanksgiving on his lips and gratitude in his heart, was “*made well*.” We dust off a book or wash the dishes and they are clean....it's a cleaning of the surface. But when one is “made well” the Source of healing becomes as important as the healing itself. When one is “made well” the heart is filled with gratitude that recognizes a deeper wholeness of body, mind and soul. The lone leper came back and connected with Jesus in praise and worship, for he understood that healing apart from relationship, that physical wholeness apart from spiritual wholeness, is incomplete! Gratitude is our faithful response to blessing!

*For what and for whom are you grateful? How do you show gratitude? How do you express thanks?* In a few minutes you will have opportunity to give an offering of gratitude. But before we do so, we will be singing one of the most beautiful hymns of gratitude ever written. We especially recognize how beautiful this hymn is when we learn the circumstances during which “*Now Thank We All Our God*” was written.

Pastor Martin Rinkart was called to be the pastor of the Lutheran church in his hometown of Eilenberg, Germany during the horrors of the Thirty Years War. Eilenburg became an overcrowded refuge for the surrounding area. Those who sought safety in the city suffered from the horrors of war as well as epidemic and famine. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great Pestilence, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. But one abandoned his post for healthier areas and could not be persuaded to return. Pastor Rinkart officiated at the funerals of the other two pastors. As the only pastor left, he often conducted services for as many as 40 to 50 persons a day...overall he conducted more than 4,000 funerals. In May of that year, he even buried his own wife. During those awful years Pastor Rinkart looked beyond that which could be seen to the unseen presence of God. Through his hymns Pastor Rinkart helped the people voice their faith and offer their praise to Jesus Christ, even in the face of constant death.

*“Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices; who, from our mother’s arms, hath blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.”*

*“O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us; and keep us in his grace and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next.”*

Pastor Martin Rinkart understood that gratitude is a choice. Naaman and the leper who returned to give thanks understood that gratitude is a choice. There are many ways to show gratitude and express thanks.

*How do you show gratitude and express thanks?*

In each worship service, as an integral part of our worship, we take up an offering of gratitude. This is a tangible way for us to express our praise, worship and thanks to God for who God is and what God has done. This week I am asking that each person here participate in this offering of gratitude by writing, on a piece of paper, two blessings for which you are grateful.

First, think of a personal blessing and write it down. Secondly, I invite you to think of Fairmont Presbyterian Church or your home church and write it down. There is something that about writing down our blessings that helps to concretize them in our hearts and minds. When the offering plate is passed offer your blessings as a thank offering to the One who is the Giver of all good gifts!

Let us take a few minutes to give thanks to God!

Amen