

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Luke 17:11-19

October 14, 2007
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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."

It's about 4:47 on Labor Day—4:47 AM—and I'm searching through Meijer, intent on finding something. I stop to look at the mums and roses just inside the door, but their colors all blur together and their aroma is overpowering. I proceed on to the toy section and think of what a rare opportunity this is to do a little Christmas shopping for Nathan while he's not riding right in front of me in the cart. But even the Bob the Builder toys in which I know he would delight, remain in their spots on the cold metal shelves. Maybe what I'm looking for is in house wares. But all I take in is the fluorescent lights reflecting off the metal and glass pans and feeling nearly blinded by the light, I move on. I am accustomed to finding solace in a good story so I head over to the book section. I pick up a best seller I've heard good things about but as I try to read the summary on the back cover, the words all blur together and so I return it to its place on the shelf next to the New York Times Bestsellers and Oprah's Book Club choices. I know there's nothing in the pharmacy that can help. I've already tried that and still I'm searching. Though I would normally head to the food section, especially the bakery, for some comfort, I avoid it completely because I know that everything there is off limits. The smell of fresh bread and donuts greets me as I walk by on my way to the register, but they only add insult to injury. By the time I finish my tour of Meijer, I've only a Ladies Home Journal to show for all of my searching. But what I have accomplished is the passing of time, it's nearly 6 AM now, only an hour to go. I drive across town to the Urgent Care Office on Munson Ave. and skim through my magazine as the minutes slowly tick by on the dashboard clock. When the clock finally reaches 6:55, I go to stand at the front door and am delighted when I discover the automatic door swinging open in front of me. They've opened early! I go in and start to sit down in the waiting room when a kind looking woman dressed in green scrubs comes out from behind a door and invites me into an office. She asks what has brought me there. I explain that I have a toothache that has been bothering me for days. The pain has become immune to the cocktail of Advil and Tylenol in which I had been imbibing. She asked me when the pain started in earnest, I told her at 5:15 Friday evening and that the dentist's office wasn't open on Saturday. She then pulled out a laminated card, a copy of which you find on the front of this morning's bulletin. She asked me to rate the pain. I tried to focus in on all of these goofy faces. My instinct was to tell her an "8"—it hurts a whole lot. But before I spoke I hesitated, remembering a segment I'd seen on the Today Show of a man who had been mauled by a grizzly bear while on a bike ride near Seattle. Surely his pain was an "8" and mine should be demoted to a "4" or "5". But in my world, the pain was debilitating and so, fearing the guffaws of the receptionist, I pointed to the "8" exclaiming, it hurts, it hurts. But instead of meeting my description with disbelief she said, "Yep, tooth pain is about the worst kind of pain we see around here." Though I would have never wished the kind of pain I felt on my worst enemy, I was glad to know I wasn't the only one whose life had been so disturbed by tooth pain—a pain so great that I was left wandering the aisles of Meijer in the wee hours of the morning looking for, searching for something, anything, to distract me from the pain.

Thankfully I was the first one seen by the grumpy doctor at Urgent Care on that Labor Day morning and within 45 minutes I had antibiotics and Vicadin in hand—enough to get me through for a couple of days until I could get a root canal. I think I literally skipped into the periodontists office the following Wednesday, 20 minutes early for my appointment, so excited was I at the prospect of having the pain relieved. And indeed, that’s what happened. And had my mouth not been filled with cotton and covered with a weird piece of rubber at the time, I think I would have kissed that doctor square on the mouth when he numbed the pain and proceeded to relieve the swelling in my jaw and fix that tooth.

And even after that experience of pretty intense pain, I can only begin to imagine what the men with leprosy experienced when Jesus healed them on that road between Samaria and Galilee. The leprosy of Biblical times is likely not the leprosy that is still a contagious and disfiguring disease in some developing countries today. Rather, the use of the term leprosy in scripture likely refers to a disease know as tzaraath—the root of which means smiting. It was believed that those who had tzaraath, which was likely any disease that produces sores and eruptions on the skin, were being punished, thus the root smite, for sin. The skin diseases were considered to be highly contagious and therefore people with them were segregated into isolated communities, known as leper colonies. It was up to the priests to determine if a person was “a leper” because it was the priest’s responsibility to keep the community clean. Anyone with these eruptions on the skin was considered unclean, and therefore had to be separated from the community. Indeed, the passages that Dick read from Leviticus are just a few of the many regarding the treatment and containment of the disease.

And that’s why we find these men with leprosy on their way to the priest. According to the rules of Leviticus, it is time for their periodic skin inspection. Anyone can see that their skin is so distorted that this visit to the priest is merely a formality and they will all be returning to their mats in the leper’s slum soon. But still, they set out towards the Temple—taking the road less traveled no doubt because, as men considered unclean, they were not allowed on the main highways and byways of life. But as they’re walking, they see a crowd ahead of them. They figure out that the crowd is following someone and that someone is Jesus, the healer and miracle worker someone in the colony has been talking about nonstop for days. They yearn to rush towards him, but knowing they are unclean, they stop at an appropriate distance and yell to him, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Imagine their dismay when, instead of saying, “Children, go now, you are healed.” He merely yelled, “Go and show yourselves to the priest.”

And is this not the ultimate insult, to be denied and dismissed by the very one in whom you have put your utmost hope and trust. Now we know that the men will be healed, healed as they are walking to the priest. And surely Jesus sent them on to the priest because he knew that it was only with the priest’s declaration of healing that these men had any chance of their lives returning to some semblance of normal. But the men did not know that, and so they are left thinking that not even the Child of God will give them the time of day.

Sadly, many of us know this kind of pain. And this is the pain that the men from the leper colony faced, the pain that is unimaginable to me. It is a pain that is greater than any abscessed tooth, crushed finger, or skin disease can render. It is the pain of rejection. It is the pain of wondering why, when your dad gets home from work, he turns up the TV and won’t even look at you, let alone ask about your day at school. It is the pain of thinking the cool kids at school like you but then finding out that they were just using you and laughing behind your back the whole time. It is the pain of knowing that you’re the best

candidate for the job and yet seeing it go to someone far less qualified to save a few bucks. It is the pain of discovering that your beloved has loved another and has betrayed you with body and heart. It is the pain of an adult child who never calls, a mother who never writes, a husband who never talks, a wife who never pays attention, a sister who never listens, a friend who never shows up, a boss who never affirms, a church that never welcomes, a society that never accepts. It is the pain of rejection, it's a 10, it hurts, it hurts as much as you can imagine. It hurts, it hurts.

And into our lives walks the healer, the miracle worker, the one who can make us feel like a million bucks, indeed the one who paid for us with his life. Into our pain of rejection and loss, our pain of isolation and shame, into our broken lives comes Jesus—with a healing word, a loving presence, an unconditional acceptance. And though he may not make the cancer cells go away or the chemicals of depression disappear or the scales of leprosy fall to the ground, he heals us. He heals us with a balm that is like no other. He brings healing and wholeness to the soul and gives us the certain confidence that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. He gives us the confidence that reminds us that we will never be rejected by, nor separated from, the love of God that is in him, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God that Jesus, our Master, has mercy on us. That Jesus heals us and makes us whole. Thanks be to God.