

**“Worship – A Sunday Choice”
Luke 17:11-19**

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On 10/10/10 we have a text with ten lepers calling, “Have mercy.” A veritable mob of human need. A senior citizen battling the killing pain of arthritis, the debilitating results of a stroke, diabetes, or cancer. Have mercy. Parents struggling to keep a child from failure or out of drugs. Have mercy. A couple battling to save their home and running out of savings. Have mercy. We have all this human need. And I think it takes a lot of gall to say that we are a bunch of do-gooders or bleeding hearts because we believe God has ordained us to meet all this human need. Yet there are pastors in this valley that are standing in their pulpits this morning urging their congregations to vote against Issue 9 – the Human Services Levy. Hopefully, those voices are being drowned out by the cries of “Have mercy on us!” We might pretend it is not our business, but we are our brother and sister’s keeper. We are the Good Samaritans of Dayton. “Have mercy” can’t be ignored.

What does Jesus do when he hears? This is crucial, because however Jesus responds to cries for mercy is the way we are supposed to respond. Well Jesus passed out mercy. Isn’t that just like him? Jesus never said “NO” to a cry for mercy. A father with an epileptic son, a mother with an emotionally spent daughter, two blind men from Jericho rushed up to Jesus and said, “Lord, have mercy.”^[i] **Goodness and mercy** followed Jesus all the days of his life. There’s no such thing as too much mercy. We are God’s mercy-dripping, mercy-granting, mercy-doing people.

And no matter what postmodernists say, there is a grand drama of mercy in the fabric of our being. You and I have been given roles in the drama. Did you think you were just part of an audience gathered here to offer your opinion about the quality of the sermon or your critique about the singing? Not on your life. You got the part. You are a member of the chorus of those who live lives in which the glory of God is revealed. This is not a bit part. You have a starring role. Spread the goodness and mercy.

Show mercy and God receives glory. Sometimes a stubborn church gets it wrong and thinks God gets glory when we throw our moral weight around, when we judge and condemn others. It’s the dark side of the church. We

see it in the treatment of lepers. The biblical law was explicit: CAST THEM OUT OF THE CAMP. They were required to wear torn clothes, and as they walked on the street they had to cry out, "Unclean, unclean." [ii]

Bad religion is a hard habit to break and after fifteen centuries of knowing that Jesus touched lepers, loved lepers, healed lepers, invited lepers into the community of faith, after all that, the stubborn, unbending, cold church still couldn't break its nasty habit. The church in the 14th century had a service called the [Mass of Separation](#). *The whole parish accompanied a newly identified leper to his/her new home as the priest performed the mass.* I forbid you to ever enter a church, a monastery, a fair, a mill, a market or an assembly of people. I forbid you to leave your house unless dressed in your recognizable garb. [iii]

I bet there were good church people of the time who said, "I don't have anything against lepers as long as they stay in their place." Please note that PLACE is a highly charged emotional and political metaphor. Lepers had a place: outside the camp. Women had a place: in the kitchen. African Americans had a place: on the other side of the tracks or the river. Gays had a place: in the closet. Illegal immigrants had a place: Mexico. The homeless in Dayton have a place: far outside of downtown. Once NY City's mayor got rid of homeless people. He simply moved them to New Jersey. So the place for NY homeless: Anywhere in New Jersey. We use place to exclude people from their rightful place.

Medicine finally eliminated leprosy, but religion retains its voracious appetite for excluding, judging, condemning people. Lepers have at various times been replaced by Jews, Catholics, African Americans, women, gays, immigrants, anyone who is different. In Mentor, Ohio, a 16 year old girl committed suicide. The native Croatian was mocked for her accent, had food thrown on her and was called names. It was the fourth time in little more than two years that a bullied high school student in this small Cleveland suburb on Lake Erie died by his or her own hand — three suicides, one overdose of antidepressants. One was bullied for being gay, another for having a learning disability, another for being a boy who happened to like wearing pink. My friend, Rabbi Sofian, tells me that his community has a queasy feeling about the environment in our country. And if anyone knows about persecution it is the Jewish community. Tell me, isn't the image of the church as moral bully a blasphemous monster?

Can God's people finally learn our lesson from a healed and converted Samaritan leper – a man doubly excluded, now healed and saved. Pour these words in concrete at the entry way to your heart: God receives glory

through mercy – act after act of mercy.[iv] Pile on the mercy. There's no such thing as too much mercy coming from the church.

Jesus, having mercy, healed all ten lepers. Nine of them quickly disappear. They make only a cameo appearance in the drama. They were not grateful, but Jesus heals indiscriminately.

But look! **One turned back to Jesus Christ.** Turning back is a term of conversion. Is Luke showing us how a person joins the church? The leper turned back and started **"praising God with a loud voice."**

The psalmist says, "Let us make a joyful noise to God; sing the glory of his name; give to God glorious praise." God receives glory from our praises. After all, isn't that how glory spreads? We repeat the stories of prodigious feats. This is how God's reputation is enhanced in the world. A major part of our witness is praising God. Of course we think of praising God as singing hymns, but it is practice for our praise work during the week. We leave here and praise God to a skeptical world.

Last Monday the Supreme Court heard the case of the Rev. Fred Phelps and his band of protestors. His little group holds up a sign at funerals of American soldiers: "GOD HATES FAGS." And this is where there must be a wall of praise raised against Rev. Phelps. The word **God** doesn't belong in the same sentence with the word **hate**. [v] John says, "God is love." [vi] We should surround Rev. Phelps with a million Christians waving signs: "GOD IS LOVE." Smother this angry little preacher in mercy, grace, and goodness. Praise is a way of proclaiming the reputation of God, and when we praise God we give God glory.

Look, there's more: The healed leper **thanked** Jesus. When he said thank you, the Samaritan entered a whole new world.

May we learn once again the power of "thank you!" I'm talking about the kind of person you become when you express gratitude and say thank you. It is a practice that makes you a better person – a person you will really like a lot. Say thank you to the person who serves your food, to the person who holds the door open for you, to the person who bags your groceries, to the person who brings you a dozen pair of shoes to try on at the mall. Say thank you to your parents for goodness sake. Say thank you to the teachers who struggle so mightily to teach your "perfect" children. The more we say "Thank you", the more powerful persons we become. Saying thank you saves us from the cynicism, mistrust, suspicion, and skepticism of our world

Sam Wells, chaplain at Duke University tells the story of Martin Rinkart, a pastor of the German town of Eilenberg in 1618 just as the Thirty Years War was beginning. Political and military refugees flocked to the walled town of Eilenberg. Disease and famine wreaked havoc in the town. In 1637 there was a terrible plague. Pastor Rinkart, who had lost half of his household, including his wife, was the only pastor remaining in Eilenberg. He conducted 4,000 funerals in that year, sometimes up to 50 funerals a day. This pastor could have been forgiven for feeling resentful, angry, and unforgiving, but he sat down and wrote one of the most famous hymns of Germany, which we know as "Now thank we all our God." In writing this hymn he displayed what we rediscover when we sing it today: the power of saying thank you.

Now, do we get it? We have a role to play: Giving mercy in a world filled with need. Praising God in a world that is filled with cussing. Saying thank you to everyone. That's our part. Let's perform it to the max.

[i] Mt. 17:15). How many fathers join me this morning in pleading for our children, "Lord have mercy." A Canaanite woman cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." (Matthew 15:22). Two blind men from Jericho cried, "Have mercy on us." The crowd rebuked the blind men and told them to shut up. The crowd opposed Jesus granting mercy, but mercifully Jesus doesn't listen much to crowds (Mt. 20:30).

[ii] **Numbers 5:2-3 makes it so clear:** "Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp every leper, and every one having a discharge, and every one that is unclean through contact with the dead; you shall put them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell." Compare Hebrews 13:13-16 – "Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. Through him let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

[iii] I forbid you to wash your hands or to launder anything or to drink at any stream or fountain, unless using your own barrel or dipper. I forbid you to touch anything you buy or barter for, until it becomes your own. I forbid you to enter any tavern; and if you wish for wine, whether you buy it or it is given to you, have it funneled into your keg. I forbid you to share house with any woman but your wife. I command you, if accosted by anyone while travelling on a road, to set yourself down-wind of them before you answer. I

forbid you to enter any narrow passage, lest a passerby bump into you. I forbid you, wherever you go, to touch the rim or the rope of a well without donning your gloves. I forbid you to touch any child or give them anything. I forbid you to drink or eat from any vessel but your own.

[iv] Mercy is rooted in God's covenant-keeping faithfulness, God's willingness to keep working with stubborn and failing people. The Greek word for mercy is ELEOS and it belongs to the genre of PATHOS: the emotion aroused by contact with an affliction that comes undeservedly on someone else. Its lowest common denominator is pity or sympathy. But it is more than an attitude; it is a helpful act. The Hebrew word is CHESED and always denotes God's faithful and merciful help. In the New Testament ELEOS is the word used for the divinely required attitude of people to people. It is a mercy that is concerned for both physical need as well as the eternal welfare of others.

[v] The only places in Scripture that I could find where it says anything about God hating is Psalm 11 and Malachi 1:3. Psalm 11 is a dubious theological claim rather than a statement by God. "His soul hates him that loves violence." Malachi 1:3 has God say, "I have hated Esau." Proverbs 6:16 says God hates haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and a man who sows discord among brothers." Hosea 9:15. Amos 5:21 says God hates bad worship.

[vi] John also says, "If any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word but in deed and in truth."