

Are You with the Nine?

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Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, NYC

Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?”

Luke 17:17

I’ve heard a lot of sermons based on this healing story, this tale of ten people with leprosy who get healed on their way to show themselves to the priests. I suppose I’ve preached a few of those sermons.

We often focus in those sermons on the nine lepers who became clean but did not return to Jesus to thank him and praise God. We think up all the reasons and excuses they may have had, reasonable reasons, excusable excuses:

Maybe they are just so thrilled and excited to be healed, they can’t stand it.

Maybe they suddenly realize they have their lives back, their normal lives, healthy lives, and they can’t wait to start living their lives.

Maybe they don’t believe Jesus has anything to do with their healing, even though they had all been shouting out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on me.” They forgot that part. I’m like that. How often does God respond to my desperate prayer in just the way I’ve asked for, and the next second I’m thinking how very clever I was to find a way out of my troubles. It happened just yesterday!

Anyway, I’m skipping that part of the sermon this time. I know we can identify with the nine. I know there are aspects of their behavior that match our behavior to a T. You know it too. So let’s not belabor the point.

Besides, what do the nine do that’s so awful—they do just exactly what Jesus tells them to do: “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” That’s what’s in the Bible. That’s what it says in Leviticus. That’s what it says to do to certify that real healing has taken place. And they’re good! They do just what they’re told. It’s the other guy, the Samaritan, who can’t follow instructions.

But my big reason for skipping over the nine, leaving them to go along on their merry way, is this:

I’m not with the nine.

It’s a simple point, and I won’t take much of your time.

But I’m not with the nine.

Let’s look for a minute at who this guy is who returns to Jesus when he finds he’s been healed.

In the beginning of the story, he's with everyone else. He's part of this small community of people with leprosy, these people who have banded together out of need and desperation.

They are required to live away from everybody else in order to contain their disease. Their disease defines them.

Luke never calls these ten people "lepers," he calls them "people who have leprosy." But to everyone else, they are lepers. That is their defining characteristic, and any differences among them just don't matter.

We do that, too, say, with "the homeless." We speak, sometimes for the sake of convenience, of "the homeless," forgetting for a second, that "the homeless" don't exist.

There are plenty of people who do not have a place to stay, a place to live, a place to sleep, a place for their belongings, a place where they themselves belong. Plenty of people.

They are on the streets and on the steps and we see them and we recognize them, but usually we recognize them only as 'the homeless.'

At the same time we know they are out there, as long as they are out there, for thousands of different reasons. As many reasons as there are people.

And if we look closely, we see, not the homeless, but individual people with individual stories and individual histories and individual troubles and individual triumphs.

I was at our shelter a few weeks ago and one of the women came up to me, she was in a good mood, I could tell. She said to me, "I'm not homeless!"

I said, "Really? You found a place?"

She said, "Yep, right here."

And I was glad we were making her feel at home, here in God's house. We ought to all feel at home in God's house!

And if we don't all feel at home in God's house, it stops being God's house, and it's just an out-of-date building with funny windows and pews for seats.

So I was glad she was feeling at home, but I started picturing her in her own place, in her own apartment, in her own life, with her own friends and her own family. Who would she be then?

Someone different than the woman standing in front of me, right now so defined and limited by that one overriding appellation: Homeless.

That's how it was for our friend, in with all the others suffering from the degenerative disease labeled 'leprosy'.

There could have been rich people and poor people in that group, old and young, Jews and gentiles, and it really didn't matter. They were lepers.

Until Jesus. Until Jesus.

Jesus sees the ten. people with leprosy. He tells them to "Go and show yourselves to the priests," and they all go, still together, still with leprosy. But a funny thing happens on their way to the temple. They are made clean, it says.

And at that point, they no longer have what kept them together; they no longer have what kept the group of them apart from everyone else.

The one sees that he is healed—seeing is so important in Luke, a lot of times we look without seeing anything. Rabbi Harold Kushner points out in his book, *Who Needs God*, "Religion is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers or a series of rituals. Religion is first and foremost a way of seeing."

A way of seeing. That's what I want my faith to be. But then, I'm not with the nine.

This one person sees he is healed and he turns back. He's already praising God, with a loud, embarrassing voice. He comes to Jesus and he falls to the ground and he thanks Jesus for the healing.

At this point in the story Luke slips a little something in, a juicy bit of information. This guy is a Samaritan.

In Luke's gospel, Samaritan is the trump card. Samaritans had a common heritage with the Jews but they were separated by territory and history, and where they thought God was to be worshipped.

The Jews, of course, worshipped God in Jerusalem. Samaritans worshipped God in Samaria—at the old sanctuary at Mt. Gezirim, near Shechem in north central Israel.

Jews and Samaritans lived in different places. There was a border between them, and it kept them apart. And the Samaritan is on the wrong side of the border.

At the time, a Jewish person would understand Samaritans to be unclean. So now that the group of people with leprosy no longer had leprosy to define them and keep them together, the Samaritan could see that he can no longer be part of the crowd. And why should he go with them to their priests. They weren't his priests!

So he returns to Jesus. Jesus is surprised to see him at first. And then surprised not to see the other nine. But this guy's no longer with the nine.

Jesus asks, "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 Jesus says to him, "Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well."

Back to faith!

Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

On the occasions when Jesus praises peoples' faith, most Christians assume that he means their faith in him, in his divinity, which he then rewards by helping them out; but that is just a sorry example of transactional theology: if you believe the right things about Jesus, then he will help you. If you don't, he won't. I am not sure where this idea comes from, but it's not from Jesus. In the first three gospels Jesus is much more concerned with making people well than with making them believe in him. ["Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation"]

This Samaritan does not return to Jesus because he has that transactional, tit for tat kind of faith.

This Samaritan comes back to Jesus because he has nowhere else to go.

This Samaritan comes back to Jesus because he's no longer with the nine.

This Samaritan comes back to Jesus because he's an outcast anywhere else.

This Samaritan returns to Jesus because he recognizes the source of his healing.

This Samaritan returns to Jesus because through Jesus he has regained something precious, his faith in himself.

This Samaritan comes back to Jesus because he can't help it.

This Samaritan returns to Jesus because in coming back he is coming back.

If you give me a choice, I'll stick with the Samaritan.

If you give me a choice, I'll hang out with Jesus.

If you give me a choice, I'll try to see things the way he sees.

Because I'm not with the nine. I'm just not with the nine.

<End>

Bless our God, O people

PSALM 66

Let the sound of our praise be heard

Bless our God, O people, let the sound of our praise be heard!

Who has kept us with the living

Who has kept our feet from slipping

Let the sound of our praise be heard!

For you, O God, have bested us

Like rock for silver tested us.

Let the sound of our praise be heard

You have caught us in your net

You have brought us in your debt

Let the sound of our praise be heard!

You laid burdens on our back

But you kept us on the track

Let the sound of our praise be heard.

We walked through fire and water

As your sons and as your daughters

Let the sound of our praise be heard!

You bought us out of trouble

And you brought us through the rubble

Let the sound of our praise be heard!

You brought us to this place

To this wondrous, grace-filled space

Let the sound of our praise be heard!

Alle-alle-alleluia!