

“Where are the Other Nine?” **Year C, Proper 23 – Luke 17:11-19**

preached by the Rector at St. Paul’s, Henderson, October 13, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

As our Gospel lessons continue to take us on the journey toward the end of the Church year, as Luke’s Gospel continues to tell us stories of Jesus teachings and miracles on his journey toward the end of his ministry, as Jesus continues his journey toward Jerusalem, “city that kills its prophets,” at the edge of a village, we encounter a band of ten desperate men, ten lepers. “Jesus, Master,” they call, keeping their distance, “have mercy on us!” Unlike his other miraculous healings, Jesus doesn’t touch these men. The story doesn’t even say he *approached* these men. Perhaps without even breaking stride, Jesus tells these men to go show themselves to the priests to prove they had been healed. And they went. And *as* they went, they realized in their hands and their feet, in their voice and their strength, that they had been healed.

One turned back, singing the praises of God, and fell at Jesus’ feet to thank him, and Jesus asked, “Where are the other nine?” And in Sunday School songs, and Bible commentaries, and a *lifetime* of sermons, we dismiss the other nine as ungrateful, faithless losers, when we’ve just been told that as soon as they obeyed Jesus simple command to go, that act of *faith* had made them whole. Maybe if we knew who the other nine *were*, we might understand where they had gone.

Joshua had had a life once, a position in the community, a place in the synagogue, a beautiful young wife. All that changed the moment the white-grey spot appeared on his left hand. Others had seen it almost before he had and his life was turned upside down. Now here was Rachael, holding out the child he had never seen. He hesitated in the way new fathers always hesitate. Then he hesitated just a moment more with a quiver of doubt that *this* was reality, instead of the rags he had worn only hours before. And then he reached out and took his family in his arms.

Caleb had never known life outside the company of lepers. Born after his mother had been cast away, he was old enough now to be *Bar Mitzvah*, a Son of the Covenant, though, of course, he had never been allowed to play or to study, much less take a place in the synagogue. Now he strode into the village of his people, an orphan with a smile as wide as the horizon, at last meeting and then embracing family he had only ever seen from as far away as the shout, “Unclean!”

Samuel had been a *tehton*, a carpenter and stone worker, from a long line of such craftsmen. His father and his grandfather had both helped with the Temple renovations in Jerusalem during Herod the Great’s reign. Leprosy’s nerve damage had ended his career, his passion, long before the lesions had sent him into the wilderness to *beg* for a living. Now standing in his family’s workshop, the chisel and the hammer fit into his hands with the weight and grace of old friends, and he knew he’d be able to *earn* a living, and provide for his family, with his own strong hands.

David and Mary had been inseparable since they were children, so it had been no surprise in their village when Mary’s father had announced that the two were betrothed. Then the world came crashing down on both of them when David’s left eye began to droop and the priest had pronounced the death sentence. For long years they had “met” each other every day at sun set, gazing at one another from opposite ends of the village graveyard. Now as they sat in his mother’s courtyard, David held Mary’s hand in both of his, making plans for their wedding, “As soon as possible.”

Jonathan had *been* married, before this curse had taken his wife, Rebecca. Unwilling, *unable* to leave her when she had been declared unclean, he had gone into exile with her, tending to her wounds, crying with her through the pain, holding her as she died. He knew what it would mean. No one knew how the disease moved from one person to another, but everyone knew that it did. And it did. Now Jonathan sat at Rebecca’s grave, laughing and crying and showing her what he had showed the priest, that he was whole again.

Joash was a Levite, a singer. He had had the duty, the honor, the *privilege*, of leading the singing of his synagogue since his voice had matured into a rich baritone. When it cracked one Sabbath, the whole congregation gasped, and when it did it again the next week, then again, the examination sent him away from everything he loved, everything he knew. Now Joash stood in the middle of the village square, and sang the Psalms of Thanksgiving, and the Psalms of Praise, and the Psalms of Ascent to Zion, as people gathered around and praised God with him.

Moshe, Simeon, and Isaac were still waiting their turn to present themselves to the priests, still waiting to hear what they already knew, that the Galilean had made them clean, that he had made them whole. Moshe was going home to his father. Simeon was going home to his mother. Isaac wasn't at all sure what he was going home to, and he didn't much care. Isaac was just going home.

But where was the other one? Somewhere along the road to find the priests that could end their exile, somewhere after the Master's command had changed all their lives forever, somewhere in the excitement of praise and plans and promises, one of their band had turned aside from the others. One had never made it to the priests as they had been told to do. One had never come to be declared clean and well and whole.

We don't know the tenth man's name either, do we? We don't know how long he had spent locked away with the unclean. We don't know how long he had suffered in pain and disfigurement. We don't know what dreams had died, what life had ended when he had found himself to be "unclean." All we know was that he was a Samaritan, which probably made him the biggest outcast of them all. This man didn't care about reaching the priests because, clean or not, the priests wouldn't touch a Samaritan. So this *one* whose obedient act of faith had made him whole, turned back. This *one* fell at the feet of Jesus. This *one* blessed and praised and thanked the one who had spoken his healing into being. And Jesus gives this *one* a new command. "Get up and go on your way," he tells him, "your faith has made you well."

Our ministry is to even *one* who hears our witness and turns aside in thankfulness for having found the Giver of Life. *And* our ministry is to the nine tenths who hear our witness, whether we know it or not, whose names we may never know, but who come to know *him* because *we* have been faithful to his call. Let us get up and go on our way, to bring the Good News to *all* who need to hear it.