

Sermon for 12th October 2025, Year C, Pentecost 18

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Luke 17:11-19

Sermon

This story of Jesus healing the ten lepers only appears in the Gospel of Luke, possibly because Luke is the gospel writer most keen to show that Jesus' message is for all the people of the world, and not just the people of Galilee and Judea. Luke often makes favourable comments about foreigners that are absent from the other Gospels, and he omits material found in Matthew where Jesus tells his disciples not to take his message to Gentiles and Samaritans.

Luke is also naturally favourable towards marginalised and rejected people of every kind, and so it's no surprise that in this story, the one leper who returns to thank Jesus for his healing is, of course, a Samaritan – the group that broke away from King David's kingdom hundreds of years earlier, only to be conquered and colonised by the Assyrian empire. So, stories like this were not just intended to encourage the Jewish people to be more inclusive of hated foreigners, but also to reassure those foreigners that Jesus' message was for them too – in fact, the Samaritans were one of the first foreign groups that the early Christians began to evangelise.

The illness referred to as leprosy in the story is a loosely defined term which described any skin blemish or suspicious weeping wound. In Jesus' day these conditions were thought to be hugely contagious and as a result, such people were forced to live in total isolation, banished from homes and villages and families, and excluded from their faith community; they were so feared that it was thought even the shadow of a leper could pass on the infection. So, a

Samaritan with this condition was doubly rejected – both for their heritage and for their condition.

But there is obviously more to this story than portraying another Good Samaritan, who is the only healed leper to return to Jesus to say thank you. For a start, there's all the questions raised by the rather contentious phrase, "Your faith has made you well." If it was the leper's faith that allowed him to be healed, what does it say about all those people who pray for healing for themselves or for others, but who do not receive the healing they long for?

Many such people have assumed that either their faith must have been inferior, or maybe that God doesn't care about them, and some come to a sad conclusion that God doesn't exist. As a priest I'm often asked for prayers by people who assume that God is more likely to hear my prayers than theirs – as if my prayers somehow have more oomph. To be fair, this has been an expectation throughout Church history, that holy people like monks, nuns and priests somehow have a direct hotline to heaven that lay people don't have access to.

But I've never really believed that prayer and healing work like this, and in fact this Gospel story up-ends that narrative in an instant, because all ten lepers were healed by Jesus, not just the one with faith who returns to say thank you. So, when Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well," he can't be telling the leper that he was only healed from his leprosy because of his degree of belief.

It would have been so easy for this story to say that only the Samaritan leper with faith in Jesus was healed while all the Jewish lepers lacked sufficient faith and went away unhealed, and if that had been the case, who would have been surprised? But they are all healed regardless of their faith, so what is going on?

I think that the difference for the Samaritan leper is that he has received a healing or a wellbeing that goes far beyond the physical. While the other lepers simply take their free gift and run, the Samaritan is showing us the transformative

benefits of living a life rooted in gratitude. Not only has he been healed of an illness, but Jesus is declaring that his gratitude has made him truly and deeply well at a much deeper and more holistic level. In fact, the phrase “Your faith has made you well” can equally be translated “Your faith has saved you,” which implies that the Samaritan’s gratitude now marks him as being part of God’s family, rather than something that allows him to be physically healed.

C. S. Lewis, when exploring his newfound faith, observed a connection between gratitude and what we might now think of as mental health. “I noticed,” he wrote, “how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most: while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.”

So, when Jesus tells the man his faith has made him well, it doesn’t seem to be anything to do with the amount of belief the man has, as if faith were a matter of cause and effect. Instead, Jesus is teaching us that having faith means living a life completely woven together and transfigured by praise and thanksgiving. This is what makes a person truly and entirely well.

The late American theologian John Burkhardt once wondered whether “humans can survive as humans without worshipping.” He suggested that “To withhold acknowledgement, to avoid celebration, to stifle gratitude, may prove as unnatural as holding one’s breath.” And there is evidence that a grateful frame of mind is by itself a stress-reducer, which is beneficial to the immune system.

From this perspective, the phrase “your faith has made you well” is no longer a problematic saying, even if healing does not come in answer to prayer. Instead, it is a description of a life lived with blessing and gratitude, acknowledging God’s presence in all situations and sustaining all that is. This gratitude improves our mental and physical well-being, not so much through a miracle as by the natural consequence of living each day pondering God’s goodness and love.

Writer Anne Lamott says her two favourite prayers are, in the morning, “Help me. Help me. Help me,” and at night, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” But why wait until nighttime?