

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, who by Your blessed word and Your Holy Baptism has mercifully cleansed all who believe from the fearful leprosy of sin, and daily grants us Your gracious help in all our needs: we beseech You so to enlighten our hearts by Your Holy Spirit, that we may never forget these Your blessings, but ever live in Your fear, and trusting fully in Your grace, with thankful hearts continually praise and glorify You; through Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen.

In the name of the one who has heard our cry for mercy and to whom we sing our hymns of thanks, dear fellow redeemed:

To better understand what happens in the Gospel lesson today it is helpful to know a little about the guidelines God had set up for Israel when it came to dealing with leprosy.

As many of you probably have learned, leprosy was a disease of the skin, and what many Bibles now note is correct: the word actually has a broad range of meaning. It covered what we think of as leprosy, but a lot of other skin diseases that manifested themselves with scaling and scabs, like psoriasis. The word could even refer to mold in the home or in your clothes. This is one of the reasons lepers were referred to as "unclean"; the disease was usually associated with unclean, unsanitary conditions which then caused a serious health problem. This is why lepers were cut off from the community; it was a way of keeping the disease from spreading. Thus if a person ever began to show symptoms of a disease like this they were to go to the priests to be examined. If the priest found discoloration and scabbing, and a white or bright patch on the skin, the person was put in quarantine for a week. If there was no change, it was considered a minor condition and the person was able to rejoin the community. If the disease had appeared to spread, you had to stay in quarantine, separated from the rest of the community. There were whole communities, whole colonies of lepers, so that while you were separated from the rest of Israel, you didn't have to be alone. And if the disease ever showed a change for the better, you could again go to a priest and be examined in the hopes that you might be declared "clean".

So with that in mind, look again at the account of the ten lepers and think about what is happening. Jesus is entering a village. While He does ten men infected with leprosy recognize Him and cry out to Him for help: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" They are hoping that this Jesus who has healed others will now heal them so they can be declared clean, leave the colony of lepers and rejoin their families and friends. But what does Jesus do? Does He call them over? Put His hands on them? Does He shout back to them, "You are healed; go in peace"? No. He says, "Go, show yourselves to the

priests." "You want to be free of your leprosy?" says Jesus. "You want to be declared fit to rejoin your families, your communities? I would suggest you start by doing what God told you to do. Go the priests, let them examine you and decide whether you are free from the disease."

In other words, Jesus seemingly does nothing. Worse, He seems to dismisses them and their concern; sends them away.

Think about the impact those words might have had on those men. They were calling out to Jesus for help because they had heard how He had healed other people with illness and diseases, even others who had leprosy. Now Jesus won't even approach them. He sends them off to the priests. And the temptation must have been very great to lash out at Jesus. To say, "Wait a minute; You don't seem to understand. Going to the priests is a waste of time. Look at us! It's obvious we're infected with leprosy! That's why we came to You! You've helped others, now we'd like You to help us. Aren't You the One sent by God? Aren't You supposed to be full of love and compassion? Then why won't You do something?"

We shouldn't be surprised if we were to find that the lepers were a bit confused, even concerned at the response of Jesus to their plea. But it is to their credit that St. Luke records no complaints or protests. Instead, they take Jesus at His word, and go. They have no promise from Jesus. They can still feel the pain of their disease and see it on their bodies. And yet they go. And at some point along the way, they are cleansed. It is, when you think about it, a remarkable act of faith.

A measure of faith for us to aspire to. For the situation of the lepers is not unfamiliar to us. We know what it is like to struggle with difficulty in our lives; our lives are not cleansed from all their problems. We suffer with ailments of the body, sometimes minor, but sometimes just as painful and just as life-threatening as the leprosy suffered by those ten men. We have known the pain of being separated from our friends and family; be it because of going away to school, or something more serious such as military deployment, or something even more serious, such as estrangement from our family because sinful actions, sinful pride, sinful anger. And we too, often seek solace and comfort by commiserating with friends, or with others who suffer the same as we do. But ultimately we cry to God for help, and what answer have you received? Has Jesus appeared to you, put His hand on you and banished the disease and pain from your body? Has a voice from heaven spoken to you and made the addiction and sinful desires go away? Or maybe you went to your pastor, and he gave you such penetrating and insightful advice, that when you went home and did as he said, all the problems you'd been having just vanished like smoke in the wind.

Or did you get advice something like, "Go show yourself to the priests"?

We know what it is like, in the midst of our pain, our suffering, our problems, to feel like while God may have heard others, He is not hearing us. That Jesus won't even draw near to us, but is shouting to us across a distance, giving seemingly banal, clichéd advice. Here I am, struggling with pain and difficulty in my life, and I may get a smattering of practical advice, but then what do I hear? Don't neglect coming to church. Be regular in your attendance at the Lord's Table. Read the psalms. And the temptation

for us becomes very great to say something like, “Wait a minute; You don’t seem to understand, Jesus. Look at me! It’s obvious I’ve got real problems here! I don’t need to sit for an hour in church; I need more than nice rituals; I need real help! I need a miracle! That’s why I came to You! You’ve helped others, now we’d like You to help me! Aren’t You the Son of God? Aren’t You supposed to be full of love and compassion? Then why won’t You do something?”

We have been confused, even concerned at the response of Jesus to our pleas. Sadly, we have found ourselves at times angry with God, even spiteful over His seeming lack of compassion toward us. Sometimes we may have even gone so far as to widen the gap between us and our Lord by neglect of His Word and Sacraments. We have not always emulated the faith of the lepers, who even without a promise depended upon the love and mercy of Jesus.

But Jesus always emulates the mercy He showed to the lepers. He always treats us with the same mercy He bestowed upon the lepers. For unlike the lepers, Jesus has given a promise to us, the promise of His Gospel. A very specific promise, made at our Baptism and repeated every time we encounter His Gospel. His command to seek Him in His Word and in His Sacraments may seem to make Him more distant, but in truth, here are the places where Jesus draws closest to us. Thus Jesus is never distant from us, and His help never far from us, for every time we are sent toward His Word we are being sent to once again encounter Him. And like the lepers we don’t always find relief right away in our encounters with Jesus; we are often called upon to wait in faith. But also like the lepers relief and comfort do eventually come, in God’s time and in His way.

In our epistle lesson for this morning, St. Paul speaks of the conflict between our sinful nature and the Spirit. We tend not to feel that conflict during when all is right with the world, because we are tempted toward the belief that prosperity, earthly prosperity, is a sign that God has drawn near to us. The account of the Ten Lepers reminds us that God draws near to us in difficulty as well. It may seem at times as if Jesus is only shouting from afar off, and worse, shouting things that don’t seem to help much, but the truth is Jesus always draws near to us in His word, and causes His people to flourish. Not necessarily in material gain (though God may grant us wealth), or in constant, excellent health (though God may grant us a life with little or no illness), and certainly not in a life free of troubles, for Jesus says *“In this world you will have trouble.”* We flourish because in the midst of this world of trouble and sin and death, we have life. We have found the answer to our hatred, our discord, our jealousy, our fits of rage, our selfish ambition, our sin in the One who says to us, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well”. We flourish because in this world of death we cling to the One who has faced our death for us, experienced it, defeated it, and now gives us life. We now

Go With Jesus

the One whom we know is Good, and whose love endures forever.

Gloria Patri...

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