

High St Uniting Church

The grace of God

Luke 17: 11 - 19

I have a 'musical brain'; whether that's a blessing or a curse, I'm not sure. Having lived almost my entire life in the church - in many churches - I have picked up songs, hymns, carols, anthems, choruses, and chants that are all stuck in my mind and pop up when certain scripture passages are read. This happens often with Psalms, sometimes with Old Testament stories, but also with a lot of stories from the Gospels, such as today when my brain went immediately to the Medical Mission Sisters, "Ten Lepers".

*Ten unclean and nowhere to go,
ten men cleansed as clean as snow.
One returned to give God thanks
but nine went away.*

Not only is this song front of mind, but it also reflects a lot of the commentaries that I looked at for this passage; the story of the healing of the ten lepers is all about gratitude and thankfulness. Whether it's those who see a connection to our communion liturgy - "It is right and proper that we should at all times and in all places offer our thanks to God" - or those who connect this story to recent converts to the faith who are full of praise and thanks to God. However, as important as gratitude to God is, is that the important lesson that the Early Church - Luke's community in particular - saw and wanted to preserve for future generations?

Like all good stories, there are multiple lessons here; gratitude is one, but not the only one. A very important lesson on faith is in this story, but maybe not apparent to us reading the English translation. Luke - the physician - takes the opportunity to make a distinction between healing and salvation. Ten lepers were healed but only one - the one who returned praising God - was 'saved', reconciled to God. The comment Jesus makes to the man is not well translated; in the Greek, Jesus says 'through your faith you have been saved', not "your faith has made you well." The phrase, "Your faith has made you well" has caused more spiritual harm than good over the centuries, with many wondering if they are sick because their faith isn't good enough. But there is an even bigger set of lessons in this story; lessons about the nature of God's grace.

All ten lepers were healed as they went off to show themselves to the priests. Incidentally that is an important part of what Jesus did for them; not just healed of the disease but welcomed back into the community. All ten were healed, that is the reality of grace. They weren't healed because they were obedient and presented themselves to the priests, or because they were grateful and returned to say thank you and offer praise to God. Their healing was a freely given, gracious act by Jesus in the power of God. No issues of deserving or earning, just grace. You can see here echoes of the Early Church wrestling with faith and works, grace and Law, and Luke giving us a story that meshes in with Paul's insistence that our connection to God through Jesus the Christ is based on faith in the grace of God rather than duty to the Law.

The one who returned to praise God and thank Jesus was a Samaritan. Given the geographic setting of the story - on the border between Samaria and Galilee - that is hardly surprising. But given the Jewish nature of the Early Church this is one more story trying to break through the idea that God's grace was for the Jewish people alone, or, given the historical and cultural background of the people of Samaria, that God's grace was limited to people who had the right understanding of God. There would have been

members of Early Church communities that not only looked down on Samaritans but had suspicions about Galileans as well! And here is a story showing clearly that God's grace is for all. God is not interested in the categories that we use to divide up humankind, the Creator looks with equal love on all creation.

Ten lepers on the border of Samaria; people who were outcasts and had to keep their distance from others. People who were far from the centres of Jesus' mission and activity. How did they know about Jesus or that he could help them? Before mass media, and way before social media, word of mouth swept through the world. However, for Luke and his community, and for every potential apostle and preacher, here is a story that says grace precedes you into the world. We are not the exclusive holders of the message of love, nor can we control who hears the message and who responds.

Gratitude and thankfulness are important. There is something powerful in starting every prayer with thanks for what God has done and is doing in our lives. But there is more to learn from the healing of ten lepers than thanks.

Understanding the difference between healing and salvation – between being healthy and being connected to God – is important. Particularly as we pray for family and friends who are ill or talk to people who are struggling to understand why they are ill. But, surprisingly, there is more to learn from the healing of ten lepers than the nature of salvation.

The grace of God is immense and free and far beyond our control or our limitations. As I started to write this, the song, "What shall I do my God to love" came to mind.

Wide as infinity

So wide it never passed by one

or it had passed by me.

There is a power in reflecting on how many cultural and linguistic barriers were crossed throughout the centuries for us to be worshipping here today. We cannot limit our interactions and our love to people who are nice, and sociable, and like us. Or to people who are responsive and show their gratitude. Or to people who share our theological views. Nor should we be surprised when people we have never met or ever spoken to, want to talk to us about Jesus and the love of God. That is what grace is all about, far bigger and more inclusive than our innate tendencies. Luke has given us a story about the grace of God coming to ten people in need, not a story about the proper behaviour of one person in response to God.

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