

Unclean! Keep Away!

Al just read for us the story of Jesus healing the 10 lepers.

I want to teach you a little about leprosy during Jesus' time.

See it was believed that if you had leprosy you were being punished by God. And you must have done something really bad to be punished with leprosy. A sin so great that you couldn't be around others – even worse, you weren't allowed to go to the temple and worship God, which was a big deal back then.

If someone had leprosy, they had to stay outside of the town and if anyone was even close to them they had to yell, "Unclean, Unclean" – to warn people to keep their distance.

Because if you were clean and you touched someone with leprosy, wow – scary thought. Not only were you afraid of catching the disease, you had to go through an entire cleansing ritual that took days, and even worse, you couldn't worship in the temple during those times.

But if you were declared to have leprosy, you were literally an outcast. How humiliating and how terrible life would be for you. Your beliefs tell you that you are being punished for some great sin and you probably have no idea what you did. You aren't allowed to work to earn money for food, you couldn't be around people, not even your own family and if you got close to anyone, you had to yell that you were unclean.

Now this group of 10 lepers, they don't sound so bad. They were probably a decent group of individuals just stricken with this terrible disease.

The lesson tells us that Jesus was entering a village when he came across them. So the lepers were hanging out on the outskirts like they were supposed to. Then the Bible says, they were “Keeping their distance and they called out, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’”

The Bible doesn't say, but I am going to assume that they were good, law abiding citizens before they acquired leprosy. Probably just regular people like you and me – except they had this incurable disease now that scared everyone.

There is a similar story in the Gospel of Mark – READ Mark 1:40-44

Now the Gospel doesn't tell us that he kept his distance or he yelled unclean or anything – but it does say he had faith in Jesus.

A great part about this story is that Jesus was so moved by this man's situation and faith, He reached out his hand and touched this leper.

Remember what I just said a couple of minutes ago about leprosy? You don't touch lepers!

According to the laws of the time, you can't touch a leper or else you have to go through a cleansing ritual. You are considered unclean.

But the beauty of that story is when Jesus said, “Go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them.”

The law was written that if you had leprosy and were declared “unclean” and if for some reason you didn't have leprosy anymore you were to go to the priest and show him. He would make a sacrifice for you, check you over and then declare you clean.

But think about it – back then – nobody ever – ever would have been declared clean after having leprosy. It was an incurable disease.

But there was this law on the books – given from God – that if anyone ever did present themselves as being cured from the disease, here were the steps you needed to do to declare them clean.

This law had been on the books for over 1,000 years! And you thought we have some worthless laws! Think what the priests thought when they were in training.

So, if anyone that was declared unclean with leprosy comes up totally healed here is the ritual to perform. I am sure a lot of studying went into that ritual!

But here he was – cured.

And what about our 10 lepers from the Gospel of Luke?

Jesus wasn't afraid of them either. He told them all to go show themselves to the priest.

Then it says, "As they went one of them saw that he had been healed." I am not sure, but I would guess it was more like, "As they ran, or that they cheerfully ran, or nervously ran"– there just needs to be an adverb there.

Think about the emotions running deep within them. All of them - All 10 were probably decent citizens – now - they were considered hideous sinners being punished by God. And here is this man – rumored to be God on Earth – giving them hope. Go show yourself to the Priest.

They were expecting something great to happen – and it did.

When I think of the way lepers were treated back then, it reminds me how people with AIDS are treated today. Now granted, they are treated better today than a few years ago.

I remember in the 80's when I was working as a Paramedic in a hospital emergency room and we got this patient in who was pretty messed up – I believe it was a car accident.

Here were the doctors, nurses, paramedics working on this guy when the word came to us from his family that he had AIDS.

You could of heard a pin drop in that room. Everything stopped. Gloves were changed, robes were put on, full face masks were donned – a couple of the attendants actually left the room and refused to be in there citing reasons like, “I'm pregnant” or just leaving without any explanation.

We have come a little way since then, but I don't think that far. I have heard people say, “They say you can only catch it from bodily fluids, but I'm not taking any chances” and “stay far away from anyone with AIDS.” So we avoid it. We don't even hear about it much on TV these days.

AIDS is a terrible sickness. December 1st is World AIDS day. We won't be doing a special offering for it because we have been asking for a lot lately for different mission programs, but I have some fliers with some information about AIDS and how to donate to help the fight against AIDS.

If you decide to donate, know that the money goes to UMCOR which is the United Methodist Committee on Relief and 100% of your donation goes towards fighting AIDS.

But how far have we really come when it comes to our tolerance with those infected with AIDS?

Sure, we don't drive people with AIDS out of the city, make them dress a certain way and yell "Unclean" whenever they get close to us.

But some Christian groups consider it a punishment from God. There are some certain well-known TV preacher personalities who have publicly stated that AIDS is a punishment from God on those afflicted with it just like they thought leprosy was a punishment.

There are a lot of people out there expressing their opinions about what the Bible says about this or that.

But as I have said many times now, I encourage you to read the Bible for yourself. See what the Bible really says. Don't take my word for it or some guy who is on TV. But read it for yourself.

And if you do read the Bible for yourself, you will see the story we shared was so much more than a just a miracle of healing for the lepers. It was so much more than the priests needing to dust off the old ritual books on how to declare a leper clean, it was more than just returning a man to his family and restoring his life.

The real beauty of this story is that everyone believed that leprosy was a curse by God. A permanent – no cure – no hope – curse.

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God didn't use leprosy as a curse against those in Jesus' time just like he isn't using AIDS as a curse against those in our time. The Plague is a disease, Small Pox is a disease, leprosy is a disease, AIDS is a disease.

It wasn't a curse - Jesus healed the lepers from their disease – he healed all 10 of them. But the Bible tells us that one realized he was clean and turned around to thank Jesus, praised God with a loud voice and laid himself flat in front of Jesus and thanked him.

Only one person thanked him. All 10 were healed. But only 1 remembered to thank him.

If asked, what excuses do you think the other 9 might have had for not thanking Him?

- But he told us to go to the priests - we're only doing what he said!
- He's God, he knows I'm grateful.
- I have so many things to do now that I can be a normal person again! I'll thank Him later.

It makes me wonder – do we make excuses sometimes for not thanking God?

- I'm obeying God - so he owes me these blessings.
- God knows my prayers before I offer them.
Why should I have to tell him?
- I'm very busy right now, I'll thank him later.
- I am hurting so much because of _____.
Why is he not helping me? Why should I thank him for anything?
- God didn't do that for me, it was: my hard work, nature, my friend, luck.

But the one leper stopped and gave thanks. I am sure he was just as excited about his healing. I am positive he wanted to get to the priest to get his life back. To see his family and friends again. To be part of society again.

But he remembered to stop and give thanks to the one that all blessings come from.

And that is what Thursday is about. Thanksgiving Day. A day that we put to the side to give thanks for what we have.

We all need to stop and think about what you have to be thankful for. I have heard some of you saying, “I thank God every morning I get out of bed.” OR “Although I have this disease, I am thankful I can still do this...” OR “I am thankful I have had a full life.” OR “I am thankful for my kids.”

We all have something to be thankful for – we need to give thanks for the small things in our lives as well as the big things, reflect on what we have to be thankful for and remember to tell God, “thanks.”

And if we can't think of anything offhand that we are thankful for, we can always thank God for giving us His son Jesus as a final sacrifice for our sins.

And today we will share in that sacrifice and give thanks to God for the eternal salvation we receive through Jesus the Christ as we join together in Holy Communion.

Please follow in your hymnals on page 12.