

Abundance as Sufficiency

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
Preached October 14, 2007

In the Gospel narrative, Jesus of Nazareth is portrayed as more than just a great guy. As our faith affirms, he is both fully human and fully divine without possessing a dual nature. Thus we are urged to imagine that to be fully human is to be fully divine, and we are urged to trust Jesus to show us the way. In his life, teachings, and ministry, he offers radical alternatives to current social arrangements. He breaks down barriers that others take for granted. He defies not only human authority, but also natural law. He performs miraculous healings which expose deeper social ills. Such is the case in Luke's story of Jesus healing the 10 lepers.

I.

In Luke 17, verses 11-19, Jesus and his disciples enter a village along the long road to Jerusalem as they pass through the region between Samaria and Galilee. Consider that this region is not prime real estate. Tensions run high in a region between people who hate each other. Consider current places of border tension - Ciudad Juarez and El Paso, India and Pakistan, Palestine and Israel, Chad and Sudan. In *this* circumstance, Galileans considered Samaritans as half-breeds and Samaritans considered Galileans as oppressive and judgmental.

If the village which Jesus enters seems to be on the margins of two societies, consider that leper colonies in that day were formed on the outskirts of villages so that there would be little to no contact between those with and those without leprosy. This separation was not only for the purpose of controlling the spread of the disease. It was also because, in the Israelite culture, to be diseased was also to be ritually impure. So the separation was doubly oppressive. The leper was shunned not only because he or she was contagious, but because the disease was a sign of God's punishment, the removal of God's blessing.

It was in this context that a group of lepers approached Jesus. We can presume they heard something about his reputation and took the risk of begging for his mercy. They remained at a distance, which was what was expected of them.

II.

Many of you are familiar with what happens next. Jesus heals the lepers, all ten of them, but only one returns. He falls on his face at the feet of Jesus, and thanks him. Knowing that today is Stewardship Kick-Off Sunday, you are perhaps beginning to imagine what the Stewardship sermon might be. You've may have heard it before, in some form or another. The script sounds something like, "If God has given you a gift, at least return and give thanks. You will be commended." If the subscript of that sermon isn't obvious enough, let's make it explicit: "The primary way you can show your gratitude for God's generosity is to support your church. No gift is too much, so please pledge sacrificially painful gobs of money (the equivalent of falling on your face), so that the church may thrive."

There is a sliver of truth in that sermon. Most of us agree that gratefulness is a good thing, that gratitude is good for a person's soul. What would a life without gratitude look like? Jesus himself asks, "Were not 10 made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" It's better to be the one than to be one of the nine.

But in this year of Claiming and Proclaiming the biblical narrative, let us not be satisfied with conventional interpretations of scripture. Let us trust that the text is as multifaceted as a pinecone, a geode, a sea anemone. Let us trust that it is a living text, that is, that the Spirit animating it wants us to see below the surface. And not just below the surface of the text, but ultimately below the surface of our lives. *Below* the surface is, in fact, where most of our lives are lived out. But *on* the surface is where most of us fix our attention.

III.

In the story of the 10 lepers, what is the gospel writer Luke trying to tell us about who Jesus is and about what he offers the world? Let's go back to the text and focus on some the details we previously passed over. When Jesus sees the lepers, the text tells us, he says to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Isn't this an odd thing to say? It doesn't seem very Jesus-like. It's as though Jesus is suggesting, "You're not my problem. Go to your priests." It's as if he's giving a religious response to a bodily need. But then we read the next line, "And as they went, they were made clean." In heeding Jesus and going to their priest, they were

made clean. But why to the priests? Because they would need to be declared ritually pure by their priest before they could reintegrate into their village. That day, they were restored to health of body and restored to their place in that society.

But what about the one? We know precious little about him, but the little we know is indeed precious. He was a *Samaritan*. This detail is placed brilliantly in the telling of the story. It comes just after the one has returned, fallen prostrate at Jesus' feet, and uttered heartfelt thanks. One can imagine Luke's audience, hearing the story for the first time, nodding along, agreeing that it's good to be the one who comes back and gives thanks. But then these words change everything and ruin a perfectly good story: "And he was a *Samaritan*."

He was a half-breed. He was the carrier of a false doctrine, the ignorant possessor of a skewed ideology. He worshiped at the wrong church, believed in the wrong idea of God. He was a hopeless and helpless loser. And on top of that, he was a leper.

Jesus asks where the other nine are, but his more salient underlying question is, "Why did the one return? Why did he not go with the others to the priest?" The answer is, he couldn't. Cleansed of his disease, as a Samaritan, he would not, could not, be declared ritually clean by the Israelite priest. This is what made Samaritans hopeless and helpless losers - they were *perpetually* unclean, and therefore forever shunned and ostracized.

While he may have, at one time, found community in common agony with Galilean lepers, he could not follow them now. They were on their way toward restoration, which was not a path open to him. So, he went in the only direction he could. Back to the source of the healing. Back to the one who healed him. Back to the one who would pronounce blessing upon him. "Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this [key word] foreigner?" Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

IV.

What must it have been like for that Samaritan to hear those words in that moment? Those are the words of salvation. Salvation, I remind you, has a common cognate with the word *salve*. According to the Gospel, and this story, in particular, salvation is about being healed. Salvation is not about being restored to the positions that are rightfully ours, to places of prominence, or at least acceptance within society. Salvation is about receiving God's healing blessing, which flies in the face of societal expectations.

- Society told you you're not beautiful because you're too fat or too thin or too whatever. God says otherwise: You *are* beautiful.
- Society told you you're not valued because you have too little, or too much, money. God says otherwise: You *are* valued.
- Society told you you're not intelligent because you don't have enough of the right kind of degrees or experience. God says otherwise: You *are* intelligent.
- Society told you you're not realistic with your ideas about peace and mercy and possibility. God says otherwise: You're not only being realistic, in me, you have the power to enact that new reality.

For whatever reasons, we humans are bent on bolstering boundaries, we humans are committed to conveying conformism, we humans are settled on satisfying ourselves with a scarcity mindset. But, according to the Gospel, this is not the purpose for which we are created.

- God intends not for us to return to our familiar environs, but to fall at the feet of a new source of blessing.
- God intends not for us to reinforce our long-held prejudices, but to accept that blessing is for all.
- God intends not for us to trudge about fixated upon bodily disease and social stigmatization, but to *know* God's grace despite our bodily or social state.

In a word, God desires for us life *abundant*. Abundant life settles not for surface non-realities. Abundant life hoards not the material. Abundant life holds out for what truly gives life. Holds out for healing. Holds out for blessing. Holds out for a touch from the holy one, and would wait a lifetime for just one touch. Just one touch would suffice.

A final question. Jesus tells the Samaritan, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” To what community will the Samaritan go? This is *the* crucial question that guides the work of the church. Amen.