

A Foreign Sense of Grace

Luke 17:11-19

I have a confession to make. I have a rather unsocial disease. I admit, you may not want to hear this since you're still grappling with the recent revelation that, as your spiritual leader, I lack vision. But, believe me, what I am about to reveal is far more distressing.

The truth be told, had I lived in another era, you would have kicked me out of here long ago! I would have been rejected by society, outcast to the margins of human civilization, plagued by the stigma and suffering of a deplorable condition that would simply make grown men cry, young children shriek in horror, and women of all ages go, "E-e-yew, gross!"

Alas, it's because I suffer from the dreaded "heartbreak of psoriasis"—psoriatic arthritis for full disclosure. For years I hid my scaly skin from public view, until one day the heavens opened and through the glorious light appeared Phil Mickelson in an Embrel commercial that gave me the courage to come out the closet. I figured if my generation's Arnold Palmer could do it and still hit those long straight drives then, by golly, Paul Hayes could aspire to that as well!

And, as incredible as it seems, through the power of prayer and biweekly Humira shots, I have been able to get my crocodile skin under control to the point where my handicap in golf is now down to 59 and, more significantly, I've become socially redeemed here in the republic of Noank. People now shake my hand; some even let me into their homes; I can walk the streets of the village and seagulls no longer circle overhead; dogs no longer snarl at me (except my own, of course); I am restored to modicum of health to where it's only my lame humor that turns people's stomachs!

So, needless to say, I think I have a vested interest and an emotional stake in this story from Luke's Gospel. I empathize with its victims, I embrace its message, I rejoice in the outcome! For me, it has more resonance with my life experience than just about anything I ever learned about Jesus from Sunday School to seminary.

Aside from my silly irreverence, what I want to point out is that we have to be careful about how we understand and interpret the healing stories of Jesus. To be honest, a simplistic, literal Sunday School rendering isn't sufficient to understand the underlying message inherent to each of them. What I mean is, many folks read the Bible (or hear it interpreted) in such a way that assumes this is what set Jesus apart—that he alone possessed supernatural abilities to cure any disease, any condition, any malady. He was a first-century magic man, in a manner of speaking, as if to say if he were here in our time, we wouldn't need modern medicine to treat us or medical research to seek cures or genetic analysis to prevent diseases—all we'd need is Jesus—just trust in him to do his supernatural thing and we would all be made well!

I don't know about you, but my life experience doesn't reflect this. Of course, there are segments of the Christian church today who have convinced their followers this is what the Gospel is all about. It's centered on healing people from physical maladies and the chronic pains of their lives. All of us have seen how a very lucrative subculture of TV evangelists and revivalists have exploited this belief and preyed upon the vulnerable as part of their evangelical schtick to draw people in to preach about sin and salvation and to underwrite their well-financed ministries and extravagant lifestyles. In my opinion, that's little more than the stuff of P.T. Barnum, certainly not Jesus. It's a shame more people don't realize this.

I won't discount the power of faith and prayer done with humility and sincerity out of selfless concern and compassion, particularly when all of us have witnessed some amazing recoveries, as well as soulful healing even when physical recovery doesn't occur. Still, it's important to recognize that healing individual lives wasn't the endgame of the miracle stories we find in Scripture; rather, every one of them are about Jesus restoring marginalized people to a community that had stigmatized and cast them out on the basis of fear or the perception of inferior status—people who were treated with less than their God-given dignity. Across the board this holds true. So what we have are prophetic narratives about the *health of the community*, not just of the fortunate few who received such amazing grace.

The story of the ten lepers who were healed is a perfect example of what I mean. It's a familiar episode most take as an example of healing and a commentary on human gratitude, which it can be to a certain extent. Nine of the lepers were ingrates (so we are normally told), unwilling to return thanks to Jesus for healing them, whereas one recognizes the debt he owes to the one who healed him and came back to thank and praise him. In short, we're taught to be grateful to God for everything in life and express it sincerely. It's a teachable tale, commonly used for Thanksgiving or Stewardship campaigns.

However, that's actually not the intended message behind this story. It's not a universal message about gratitude. Instead, it's much more impactful and prophetic by virtue of who this story is about. Let's start with the physical context. Jesus is walking through borderland between Galilee and Samaria on his way south to Jerusalem—through a fairly mountainous region away from most of the more populated cities and villages, closer to the coast or Jordan River valley.

Historically, after Solomon this was the dividing zone between the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah—a type of Mason-Dixon line, if you will. However, in Jesus' time, it was the borderland between Judea and Samaria, which symbolized the cultural and religious divide between Jews (or Judeans) and Samaritans.

History has a way of piling up grievances that divide people and create bitter rivalries, which certainly was the case between Jews and Samaritans. The Judeans considered themselves more ethnically and culturally pure than Samaritans, whose lineage as Israelites was diluted over time; the same was true in regard to their view of orthodoxy, as Judeans maintained the temple and city of Jerusalem that were rebuilt following the exile, under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. In contrast, the center for Samaritan worship was at Mt. Gerizim—a location adjacent to ancient Shechem, the holy site for Israel from the time of the Patriarchs. Throughout the generations, this rivalry was stirred up on many levels, and certainly reached a dramatic and bitter climax 120 years prior to Jesus, when the armies of the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty during the Maccabean period extended Judah's power northward and imposed their rule over Samaria, including destroying the temple on their holy mountain. By the time of Jesus, the hatred and prejudice expressed between them was deeply felt and ugly, though Samaritans felt oppression and bigotry most acutely. In today's vernacular, it would have been the Samaritans rising up to claim their lives mattered.

So it was in this setting that Jesus made his way toward Jerusalem from Galilee. Aside from the more obvious social tensions, Jesus encountered ten lepers who had heard of his reputation as a healer. The plight of lepers was far worse than even for Samaritans, as it was not racial

or ethnic or cultural stereotypes that marginalized them. They were outcast by every society, based on a universal fear of their condition and from an ancient perception that they represented the most ritually unclean of all. Their lives were literally godforsaken—worthless, by all measures, as long as they were showing evidence of their scaly skin.

Mind you, the leprosy described in the Bible is not the disease as it's defined today, in terms of a bacteria-caused skin condition known as Hansen's disease, which wasn't diagnosed until centuries later. Leprosy in Scripture refers to any skin condition that results in scaly skin—rash, acne, eczema, but in most cases, it was a form of psoriasis—an immunological condition caused by inherited genes, not by contagious contact, as the ancient world believed. Hence, lepers were a sorry and stigmatized lot—victims of social prejudice and ignorance—condemned to a life of isolation and social shame. If you want a sense of how much fear and prejudice existed and how miserably lepers were scorned, read Leviticus 13—the entire chapter goes into it in detail prescribing how they were to be treated.

Let me offer one sample:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean!" He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (vv. 45-46)

It's a fascinating chapter. It makes me think, if you are one who insists that every word and instruction in the Bible is divinely inspired and declared, then you will have a hard time reconciling this demeaning and cruel treatment with a loving Creator, who you would think should have known the underlying cause of this condition! So whose fear and ignorance does this actually reflect?

So now we return to the story and we can understand the plight of these desperate lepers. Before Jesus reached the village he was passing through, ten lepers approached him, and while keeping their distance (so as not to make incidental contact and Jesus ritually unclean), they asked for mercy. Jesus responded to them with compassion (unlike the average person) and ordered them to go to the priests. Why? Because, according to Leviticus, priests were the only ones who could declare a person ritually clean or unclean. The entire lives of these poor lepers hung in the balance of how a priest characterized them. As the story goes, they all went off toward Jerusalem to find their freedom from a priest who could judge their lives, and along the way they were healed! It must have been an amazing story to tell.

Except one of the ten returned to Jesus. We're told it's because he alone was grateful. That may or may not be true. Frankly, I can't imagine a single one of the ten not being grateful for being healed from this terrible condition and social stigma. But then, we're also told, the one who returned was Samaritan.

Why does this matter? Because the Samaritan knew that if he went to Jerusalem with the others, chances are, he would have been the only one who the Judean priest would not have declared clean and able to return to the community. Religious rivalry and prejudice were still factors. He was aware that as a Samaritan his life wouldn't matter, he would likely still be marginalized and treated as unworthy of such grace. Consequently, he could only return to Jesus and express his unending gratitude for the physical relief from his condition, as he would still remain an outsider to Judean society, leprosy or no leprosy.

From our perspective, we know something is wrong; but then look how bigotry works. The terrible social legitimacy of human prejudice is often masked behind religious orthodoxy. Calling it “biblical” somehow makes bigotry legit. We still see it around this world in regard to race, gender, ideology, and sexual orientation. Orthodoxy trumps grace in all too many religious settings.

As the revealer of divine grace, Jesus wasn't willing to be a party to such abusive shaming. He often lifted up the inherent racism and bigotry within his own society and culture—as good as it may have been relative to other societies and culture of the time. Jesus highlighted all sorts of marginalized people in his journeys around Galilee and Judea—those with low incomes, those with scandalous pasts, those with sexual offenses, those with handicaps, those from other races, religions, nationalities, and ethnicities, those who often were targets of scorn and stereotypes, long before they were acknowledged as human beings and worthy of God's love and grace.

The fascinating thing is, Jesus' message and ministry brought a foreign sense of God's grace to those who were in the mainstream, those who enjoyed the privileges and social freedoms of life, those who defined the social expectations and religious rules and maintained them for their own benefit generation after generation. It wasn't conventional wisdom to imagine that the mercy of Israel's God would extend to those whom Scripture explicitly condemned to be outcast; they wouldn't necessarily make a place for inclusion once you possess a visceral conviction you can't trust those you fear. They needed a place for lepers in their world—the outcasts, the expendables, the deviants, the aliens, the unclean—because

moral purity and social value only exist if, and only if, someone else is godforsaken and worthless! Otherwise, it's a meaningless scale.

To be honest, it's a strange feeling for me in some ways, because I know apart from this foreign sense of grace and our enlightened minds, I probably would not be here with you (and certainly not as your pastor). Yet, I am here because we know a little knowledge can change ancient prejudices.

So we should constantly test our social and moral worldviews, especially if they are based solely on the Bible. Who is it that still needs to experience such grace in our world—who is it that remains on the outside of our personal lives, our community, our society, and even our orthodoxies because of reinforced fears and ignorance? Who is still less than equal to any of us? These are good questions to wrestle with in these times and how we answer them may well determine just how faithful to the gospel we will be.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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