

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity  
22 September, Anno Domini 2019  
St. Luke 17:11-19  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Probably most people who hear this account of Jesus' encounter with the ten lepers are struck first by the terrible manners of the nine. And we should be. They had been miraculously healed by Jesus and they didn't even return to give Him thanks. What He did brought them back into the fellowship of their people. He enabled them to return to their lives.

But the truth of the matter, is that they weren't just thankless. It's much worse than that. They were faithless. They rejected Jesus as God and Savior, as the One who had helped them in both body and soul. Not at first. At first, all ten had great faith. Jesus didn't say "You are healed." He simply told them to go and show themselves to the priests, something you only did IF you were healed. Based on all they had heard about this Jesus of Nazareth, they believed that they would be healed and so they made the journey to the priests to be declared clean. They believed that, even if the healing wasn't immediate, Jesus wouldn't send them to the priests in vain. They were still lepers on the way. But faith remained. Jesus would have mercy upon them as He had shown and promised.

And so they went joyfully. They showed themselves to the priests but they never returned to Jesus, the one who had healed them. Only one kept the faith and the one that kept the faith was a Samaritan, a foreigner, once an unbeliever! The other nine were persuaded away from the true faith by the priests at the temple. Certainly the priests would have asked how they were healed, just as they asked the blind man whom Jesus healed. (John 9) The now-former lepers would have confessed "Jesus of Nazareth healed us". And at that, the priests would have trembled. They hated Jesus. They hated His work. They hated His doctrine. And most certainly they would have begun preaching to the lepers against Jesus, arguing that he had a demon, that He was a blasphemer and breaker of the Sabbath. They would have drawn the lepers back to the Law as their help and salvation.

Satan hates faith and will stop at nothing to steal it away. As soon as faith is born and begins to grow, as soon as a sinner comes to know the peace and freedom of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus, Satan sets to work to snuff it out by any means necessary. He snatches the Word from us. He begins to fill our hearts with the

worries and cares of the world. He afflicts us with all kinds of temptations and afflictions. He seeks to make us content with the goodness of our own works and our own righteousness. He stirs up rivalries and petty arguments within the body of Christ, turning Christians against one another. He seeks to lure us away from the way of truth by dangling the pleasures of the flesh in front of us and offering us an easier way, a way where you don't have to deny your desires, where you don't have to make sacrifices, where you are your own master, where there are no crosses to bear.

These are the works of the flesh and this is what St. Paul warns us about in chapter five of his epistle to the Galatian Christians. And notice how he says that the ways of the flesh are evident. They're completely obvious and yet how easily we are deceived and allow ourselves to walk in the way that leads to death. Certainly the apostle's list isn't meant to be exhaustive. It doesn't need to be. Just by that short list a deadly arrow has been lodged in each of our hearts. We are guilty of taking up arms against the Spirit of God and acting according to our sinful flesh. We who have been washed clean in the waters of Holy Baptism have turned back again to the foolish and deadly ways of the world, as though Jesus' death was completely unnecessary because our former manner of life really wasn't evil and contrary to God's Word, as though the absolution was an invitation to more sin or a cloak which allows us to still engage in sin but not get hurt by it. It's not. If you had any doubts, hear Paul again: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Dear children of God, we walk in danger all the way. You have heard the Good News! You have been rescued out of the dominion of darkness and been welcomed into the kingdom of God's grace and mercy. Like the ten lepers you have been cleansed by the forgiving flood of Holy Baptism and feasted on the manna of heaven. Having been so richly blessed by and in Christ, would you then, like the nine walk away from Jesus as though you never needed Him in the first place or as though you only needed His grace to get you back on your feet and you'll handle the rest of your salvation? Would you fall back into the delusion that the Law will save you, that you will make it to heaven because you have worked hard to be a good person and do the best you can?

Don't be fooled. It doesn't matter how good an excuse you try to slap on it, sin is sin and it condemns you. God does not simply wink and turn a blind eye at your sin. He doesn't understand when you bicker and chew one another up. He doesn't understand when you fill your heart with worry and anxiety despite all His promises. He doesn't understand when His children choose the things of this

world over His Word and the Means of Grace which He purchased for us at the cost of the life of His dear Son. He doesn't understand when we dishonor and disobey our parents, our teachers, or our rulers. I suppose I should say, He does understand just as He understood why the nine didn't return. They had fallen to unbelief. They returned to the idolatry of self-righteousness and despised the righteousness of Christ. They despised the very means by which God had delivered them from their uncleanness. Our sin, our failure to return to Christ, from whom flows all good in heaven and on earth, is rooted in the same idolatry, self-righteousness, and unbelief.

The lepers were healed, to be sure. Christ didn't take that bodily healing away from them for their rudeness. But they were not blessed to hear the even more glorious word from Christ "Your faith has saved you." Because it didn't. They had forsaken the Gospel for the Law, salvation for self-righteousness. They had forsaken the faith they once had in Christ. They may have been restored to their daily life, but they sank into a death far worse than the leprosy could have ever brought upon them. They rejected the very One who healed them and could have given to them everlasting life.

This is the ever-present danger for all who have been given life by Christ. We are constantly tempted to forsake the righteousness once given and simply stay at the temple offering our good works to God. We are tempted to grow cold to the gifts by which Christ bestows life and salvation upon sinners. We are tempted to pretend that every day is not a new fight in the battle against our flesh and the devil's attacks as we journey toward our eternal home. We are tempted to fill our bellies with the things of this world - beauty, wealth, popularity, power, control - and tack on the things of Christ as a nice garnish. We are tempted to confuse earthly blessings with eternal blessings. We are tempted to treat our life in Christ as a thing once given that can never be lost.

Repent. The faith of all ten lepers burned brightly at first. They believed that Jesus was merciful and that in Him God would help them. But nine lamps of faith faded and were snuffed out because they looked somewhere besides Christ for their salvation. Statistically, that's a terrible success rate. Danger and temptation are all around you. Satan is not satisfied to have you snatched out of his hands and he will not rest until he has stolen back. And you are powerless to stop him on your own. You didn't save yourself from death at the first nor do you have the power to remain in the faith by yourself. Your flesh longs to step away from Christ and return to self-righteous indulgence of the flesh. Only by recognizing that you are only safe in Christ, only by daily being cognizant of your own frailty

and need for God's continual mercy and cleansing will you return again and again with the Samaritan and remain with Jesus. Jesus is God's help and mercy in your need. The Body given and the Blood shed on calvary are your shield against sin and death, against the onslaught of temptation and persecution that must always hound the children of God in this world.

May God the Father grant us all His Holy Spirit that we might always be mindful that our salvation lies only in Jesus so that we return in faith to our Savior and receive the forgiveness, life, and salvation that He freely brings through the preaching of His Word and the precious Sacraments.

In the Name of +Jesus.