

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)
Thanksgiving Eve – November 24, 2021
Luke 17:11-19 – Jesus Cleanses the Ten Lepers
By Vicar Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Hear again from the Gospel, “And Jesus said to him, ‘Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.’” So far our text.

Although our ESV translation is generally pretty good, in the gospel text for Thanksgiving Day it is disappointing that it translates Jesus’ words to the leper, “Your faith has made you well.” The Greek verb is *sesoken* – saved. Your faith has saved you. The same text has other verbs for healing and cleansing. The ten lepers were cleansed as they went on their way to show themselves to the priests; the one Samaritan saw on the way that he was healed. But the verb Jesus uses is deeper and all-encompassing. Your faith has saved you.

By introducing theological language of salvation, Jesus shows that the physical miracle indicates a deeper spiritual reality. The leper’s physical body was restored, but both his body and soul were saved from hell. This is a repeated theme in Luke’s gospel. Luke 7: Jesus forgave the sinful woman and told her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”¹ Luke 18: Jesus restored the sight of a blind beggar and told him, “Recover your sight; your faith has saved you.”² That’s the purpose of Jesus’ coming: to save sinners by dying for you. After all, his very name – Jesus, Yeshua – means, “Yahweh is Salvation.”

But if the point of this text is that Jesus alone saves, why did Jesus say to the leper, “Your faith has saved you?” Could this mean that we contribute to our salvation in some tiny way, by believing what God has promised? Of course not. Consider the almost hostile reference Jesus makes to the leper, “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Jesus was certainly shaming the Jews for their unbelief, but he was also showing that the Samaritan wasn’t saved for any admirable quality in himself. His faith was a gift of God’s grace. “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”³

God creates faith in us by his grace, so that we might believe in Jesus our Savior. This is the fundamental message of Christianity. After healing a crippled man, the apostle Peter boldly proclaimed to the unbelieving high priest, “Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”⁴ Not just may, but must be saved!

Yet the world doesn’t think it needs to be saved. Everybody feels fine. When Peter confronted the high priest, his preaching was ignored. The high priest thought he was saved by circumcision, that he was already an heir to the promises to Abraham. He didn’t need deliverance. And that’s how everyone thinks of himself. Those people over in Afghanistan, they need to be saved. Those people suffering from covid and those people dying of cancer, they need to be saved. Those homeless people holding up cardboard signs, those drug addicts, those people in prison, they need to be saved. But me? I’m fine. This thinking is so pervasive that it’s how we all talk. Someone asks you how you’re doing, you respond, “I’m fine.” What’s more, we think of ourselves as saviors. We can cure hunger by volunteering at Feed My Starving Children, by cooperating and working together. We can bring world peace by sending our military overseas as peacekeepers.

The only people in the world who seek salvation are the most desperate ones. That was certainly the case with the ten lepers. Everyone in Samaria and Galilee was sinful, everyone needed a savior. But only the desperate lepers, unclean and utterly cut off from society, recognized their need, at least physically. They cried out, “Jesus, master, have mercy on us.” They knew that nothing they could do would cleanse their rotting flesh, since they were literally walking dead men. In the same way, people who never pray at all suddenly cry out to God for help in the face of disaster and calamity. They finally realize what was true all along, that they’re walking dead men. When we realize our mortality, we turn to God for salvation.

¹ Luke 7:50

² Luke 18:42

³ Ephesians 2:8

⁴ Acts 4:10-12

All ten lepers knew their mortality, and they demonstrated faith in God's salvation. They accepted Jesus' prophetic words, "Go and show yourselves to the priests," as words from God. They trusted these words and went on their way even though their skin wasn't cleansed right away. To make an Old Testament connection, their faith and obedience were like that of the widow of Zarephath in the time of Elijah. Remember how during the famine the widow was out gathering sticks so she and her son might cook their last morsel of food and die. Elijah told her that her jug of oil and jar of flour would not go empty. But first he asked her to use her remaining oil and flour to bake some bread for him. Amazingly, she obeyed and made a little cake for him, trusting that his prophetic words would come true. And for her faith, she and her household ate for many days, the jar of flour was not spent, and neither did the jug of oil become empty.⁵

So for their faithful obedience, all ten lepers were healed. But although they were healed in body, the nine weren't really seeking the salvation of their souls. Like most desperate men who cry to God, they were crying for a miraculous rescue in the moment. They weren't crying for salvation from hell, they just needed a quick fix now. So they continued on their way, happy to get what they needed.

Perhaps they continued to the temple to thank and praise God there, since as Jews they thought God's true presence was in the temple. But Jesus himself is savior, because he himself is God. In his presence – by his name we must be saved. Only the foreigner recognized Jesus as God incarnate, only he found true salvation in Christ. In fact, the Greek text reveals the Samaritan's praise to Jesus as praise to God. Listen to a literal translation: "But one of them, seeing that he was healed, returned with a loud voice glorifying God, and he fell on his face by his feet, giving thanks to him." He fell at the feet of God. He believed that Jesus is God, that Yahweh is salvation. Such spiritual revelation is only by the Holy Spirit. This is true saving faith, crying out of the depths to Jesus for forgiveness, life, and salvation.

So it is with us. Even though we might feel fine, the Holy Spirit convinces us that it's a delusion. We realize that we don't bear the good fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace. Though we belong to Christ, we know we still bear evil fruits of the flesh with its passions and desires.⁶ Our sin is far worse than skin-deep leprosy. But we seek the presence of Jesus for salvation here in the divine service. We confess, "I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto you all my sins and iniquities..." Jesus hears this cry of faith, and he answers it. He's pleased to raise us up, comfort us, and assure us of salvation. He sends pastors, called and ordained to speak saving absolution, to forgive us in Jesus' name.

Jesus also assures us of salvation in the Lord's Supper. If he poured out his blood on the cross and gave his body for us, if we have that body and blood here to eat and to drink, then we know that our savior is with us. And we're also assured in the benediction at the end of the liturgy. Hearing, "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and give you peace," is as much as hearing Jesus say, "Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you."

With such assurance, we know our Lord will not forsake us in the day of judgment. When on that day all unbelievers realize how desperate they really were, how much they needed a savior, it will be too late. But you, since you trusted in Jesus, will have nothing to fear. Instead you will hear his blessed words, "Your faith has saved you." And you will enter the heavenly courts rejoicing with a loud voice, joining all the saints to praise God and giving thanks for his great mercy. "Oh give thanks unto the Lord for he is good, and his mercy endures forever."⁷

In the name of Jesus our Savior. Amen.

⁵ 1 Kings 17:8-17

⁶ Galatians 5:22-24

⁷ Psalm 136