

# Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

## RETURNING TO GOD'S MERCY

Luke 17:11-19

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

11On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 15Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

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Noting the difference in meanings of the three words that describe what happens to the characters in this text is important. In v. 14, the phrase "made clean" is the translation of a Greek word that has come into English as "catharsis." In v. 15 the Greek word translated as "healed" is its own distinct Greek word and is also often rendered as "cured." In this text study I will use the word "cure" to render both these words. In v. 19, the phrase "made well" is the translation of a Greek word

that comes into English as “salvation.” This word indicates something significantly different from the other two words. All ten lepers in this text receive “catharsis” or a “cleansing” or a “cure” from leprosy from Jesus; but only the Samaritan receives “salvation,” that is, has everything “made well” between him and God. This distinction is important in my interpretation of the text.

## **DIAGNOSIS: Abandoning God’s Mercy**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Pariahs***

The ten lepers represent those who, for one reason or another, find themselves excluded from the former, familiar existence they enjoyed in human society amongst kindred folks. In the case of the lepers, their disease has made them pariahs in a literal, geographical, sense of the term. They are on the outs from their old former existence; they are required, as our text says, to “keep their distance.” Of course, there are lots of other ways people, then and now, experience being pariahs. But what’s especially important to note here is that they know they are pariahs—and rightly so. They know they are a danger to others. They concur with the assessment of the priests, the legal protectors of society... And they know they can do nothing to change that fact. Indeed, this knowledge of the law, true as it is, only exacerbates their alienation.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Longing for Their Former Existence***

It is, therefore, understandable that when the lepers get wind or word that Jesus is near, they cry out to him, “Lord, have mercy.” They obviously heard about the great miracles he performed and saw in him a way to be cured of their external disease and return to their old, familiar existence. Of course, what they don’t see is their internal disease: that is, their sin which makes them pariahs, not with regard to their fellow

human beings, but with regard to God. Therefore, unaware of this, the only thing they long for is to return to their former existence, to life in that legally managed society that had rightly excluded them in the first place because of their leprosy. As a result, what they long for is what they get—and that's all they get! True, they get cleansing from their leprosy, just as they wanted... True, they get to return to their old existence within their old community that is defined by law, just as they wanted... But what is also true is that they don't get what Jesus calls being "made well."

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** : *Cured, but Not Made Well or Abandoning God's Mercy*

And that is the ultimate tragedy in this story: their longing to return to their old existence comes at the cost of abandoning Jesus, the very Mercy of God, who granted them what *they* wanted (a cure), but who, because of their longings, was not able to grant them what he (Jesus) wanted: namely, "wellness." They were cured, but not made well. Perhaps the very reason they didn't return to give thanks to Jesus is because they couldn't. They were once again hopelessly bound to that law which by definition excluded mercy. And by excluding mercy, it had to exclude Jesus and any praise of him. But what no one in this community under law realized—not even the priests—is that the very law which they cherished for their protection (the political function of the law) also ensures their destruction (the theological function of the law). For where you find law, you find sin. And wherever you find sin, sooner or later, you find death, the law excluding sin permanently.

**PROGNOSIS: Returning to God's Mercy**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Making Well and the Resurrection*

It is significant that Luke reminds his readers, prior to his

telling the story of Jesus' encounter with the ten lepers, that Jesus is "on the way to Jerusalem." For Jerusalem is where the big show down between the administrators of God's law (in, both, its Jewish and its Gentile versions) and the administrator of God's mercy (Jesus Christ, the true Son of the Father) happens. True, Luke makes it very clear that the law has no legitimate case against Jesus *per se*. He is not a sinner, he is personally "innocent" (23:47), all is "well" between him and the Father. Yet, he is guilty of this: of overruling the verdict of the law on sinners. And in the playful language of Luke, this could be called insurrection, but not at all like the insurrection that that other "Son of the Father," Barabbas, is charged with. To be sure, throughout his ministry Jesus is overruling the law of God in the name of God's mercy, even as he is in the story of the ten lepers. But nowhere is this clearer than in Luke's presentation of the two thieves on the cross (23:39-43). There Jesus categorically declares that the troubled thief (the one who knows he is guilty as charged by God's law and not just Roman law) will be with Christ in paradise. That this word is true, that it has the Trinity's backing, is evidenced by the fact that Jesus is himself raised from the dead and elevated over everything, including the word of law, to be Savior and Lord of all. His resurrection is evidence that he is not simply administering a cure for the purpose of reinserting us under the old community governed by God's law, but that he is "making us well" (v. 19) for the purpose of being inserted into "paradise," into the new community that is governed by mercy. In short, he dies and rises to make us well with God as he is well with God.

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Being Made Well and Faith***

But how does the "wellness" that Jesus has established in his Resurrection become the personal reality of sin-sick, law-condemned, God-forsaken humanity? That is the chief question

that this particular text seeks to answer and the Samaritan becomes the foil for answering it. It is by faith in Christ alone that the Samaritan is “made well” (v. 19). Note, here there are no polemics about who is right concerning the law of God—the Samaritans or the Jews. That’s because the law has no role to play in our being made well with God. All is well through faith in Christ apart from the works of the law. Here there are no polemics about where God’s praise should be directed—Mount Zion or Mount Gerizim. All praise is directed to Christ as an expression of faith, not as a work of the law. That’s because all is well between God and us because of faith in Christ. Indeed, faith is a matter of constantly “returning” (v. 18) to Christ as the One in whom we are “made well” and as the One to whom we “give [our] thanks” (v. 19).

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *People on the Way*

What is most striking in this text is where the nine go (back to be re-inserted in the community under law) and where Jesus tells the Samaritan to go. The Samaritan is simply instructed to “go on [his] way” (v. 19). The life of faith is not a life of compulsion; it is not a life marked with rules and regulations. Rather, it is a life of freedom, a life of simply “being there” for others as Christ was there for the Samaritan. The life of faith doesn’t mean forsaking the world of law or the life of work and family and politics, but it means “being there” in a new way, for a new purpose. It means “being there” not only for the sake working on “cures” for that which ails people and society, but also for pointing it in the direction of the One who alone can truly “make all things well” with God. To be people “on the way” means, as the old offertory prayer put it, to “dedicate ourselves to the care (curing) and redemption (making well) of all that God has made.”