

Ten Percent

Craig Atwood, HMC, Oct. 12, 2025

Luke 17: 11-19

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy^[a] met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

INTRODUCTION

We are living in an age of scientific and medical miracles that have increased human lifespans and made it possible for hundreds of millions of people to live and work without the stigma of disease. We are inundated with advertisements for a bewildering array of medicines, vaccines, health care facilities, and wellness plans. Many of the diseases that plagued our ancestors, like cholera and bubonic plague, have been virtually eliminated through better hygiene, inoculations, and anti-biotics. Thanks to modern surgery and prosthetics, we rarely see the evidence of disease, disability, and disfigurement that was once common in every town and village.

One reason the coronavirus pandemic was so devastating is that few people had ever lived through a pandemic. For most of us, that was our first experience of the trauma of quarantine. I know that we want to forget that terrible year, but for just a moment try to remember what “social distancing” was like. I remember walking to my office in a nearly empty building day after day, seeing my colleagues and students only on a computer screen. It felt like I was in a Twilight Zone episode. I no longer heard the voices of children at the school across the street. Our groceries were delivered by strangers who did not speak to us.

In a small way, during the pandemic, we shared the experience of the ten men in our scripture passage for today. They suffered from leprosy, which made them objects of pity, fear, and disdain. They lived together because they shared the same affliction. They had been cast out of their family homes and left to die in the shadows. Their isolation was at least as painful as their disease.

LEPROSY

The Greek word *lepra*, which is where the word leprosy comes from, means scaly. It was used for a variety of skin diseases, including what today is called Hansen's Disease. It was common practice to isolate people with visible skin diseases, in part out of fear of contagion, but also because their appearance was unsettling. If their families could or would not care for them at home, the victims of leprosy were forced to live on the edge of society, begging for scraps of food and clothing. In many cases, families were so afraid of the stigma of leprosy that they moved to a new village, abandoning their sick child forever.

The word leper still frightens us. Before modern medicine found an antibiotic to treat Hansen's disease, its victims were often forced to live together in isolated communities called "leper's colonies." There is a dramatic scene in the movie *Papillon* in which a man who escaped from the penal colony of Devil's Island found temporary refuge on an island inhabited by victims of leprosy. The lepers helped *Papillon* because he did not recoil in horror at their appearance. Since he was willing to eat with them, they were willing to help him. I saw that movie when I was 13 and that scene made a lasting impression on me.

For decades Moravian missionaries ministered to victims of Hansen's disease in South Africa and Palestine. The leper colony in South Africa was on Robben Island, which later became famous as the prison where Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists were imprisoned. It is telling that those who demanded racial justice in South Africa were literally treated as lepers. In Palestine, the Moravians built a beautiful hospital complex called the Jesus Helps leprosarium to care for people with leprosy. The Moravian doctors insisted that the residents be treated with compassion and dignity. This included having work for them to do. With the help of the residents, the built a garden that was so beautiful it was named Paradise. After Hansen's disease was cured in the mid-20th century, the hospital staff moved to a new facility at Star

Mountain in Palestine. It ministers to children and youth with mental and physical disabilities. They, too, were often treated as lepers in their villages.

JESUS AND THE LEPERS

The reason the Moravian missionaries felt a call to minister to people afflicted with leprosy was because of the example of Jesus in the gospels. The story I read from Luke's gospel is one of several times that Jesus healed people of leprosy and the stigma that accompanies it. This story appears only in the Gospel of Luke. It comes immediately after Jesus' teaching on faith that Ginny preached about last week. Jesus talked about what a person could do with faith that was as small as a tiny mustard seed. I think this story of the healing of ten men with leprosy illustrates Jesus' message about faith. A little faith can go a long way.

It's a short, but vivid story. Ten men trying to hide their cracked skin under tattered rags that served as clothing dared to raise their voices to Jesus. Ten men who were like walking skeletons because of their meager diet had enough faith to beg from Jesus. Ten men called out to Jesus from the depth of their suffering. They had long ago forgotten what it is like to be touched in kindness or treated with respect, but they took the risk to call for help. They did not dare to approach Jesus, but called to him from a distance, begging for pity. Ten men who had been shunned by their families, their neighbors, and even their priests and rabbis lifted their eyes in hope as Jesus walked toward them.

PRIESTS

Jesus did not ask them anything. All he did was tell them to go and show themselves to the priests. The ten may have wondered if he was mocking them because the law forbade priests from touching lepers, but they went anyway. They trusted Jesus and went in search of a priest. As they obeyed Jesus, they saw their skin was being healed. Nine of them ran to the priest so he could verify their restoration and let them return to their homes. We know nothing about them and should not judge them too harshly for happily running to show themselves to the priest.

But one turned back. He was a Samaritan, and no Jewish priest would be able to help him. Even after he was healed, the Samaritan was still an outcast. He did not go in search for a priest. Instead, the Samaritan looked back to his savior and praised God. The Samaritan fell down at Jesus' feet in recognition that Jesus was the only priest he needed. He alone placed his faith and trust in Christ.

We don't know what happened to the men after they were healed. I think the nine went back to their families and tried to pick up the lives they lived before their infection. But I suspect that the Samaritan did not do that. Even though, Jesus told him to go, I think he probably stayed with Jesus. I picture him joining the growing group of disciplines who walked with Jesus to Jerusalem. I imagine that the Jesus followers give him clothing and fed him and embraced him in love. We do not know the Samaritan's name, but we remember his faith and devotion.

LEPERS TODAY

Today we know that Hansen's disease is not highly contagious. In fact, fewer than 5% of people could develop the disease even if exposed. And today the disease is curable, but the stigma that was once associated with leprosy endures in other ways. Think about modern America for a moment. Are there people who are victims of misfortune who are forced to exist on the edges of society? Are there people in this city that we avoid looking at, who are treated with fear and contempt, who are forced to live by begging and charity because they cannot work? In our minds we know that their misfortune is not contagious, and yet we fear them. They are stigmatized, and we fear that they will drag us down with them. We see them on the sidewalks and walk faster. We see them forming small communities in abandoned wastes or under bridges, and call upon authorities to remove them, arrest them, confine them, or exile them. In some cities, it is illegal to give them people food.

They do not have leprosy, but they are treated like lepers because they have committed the crime of being poor in a rich country. Many of them lost everything because they could not pay their medical bills; others suffer from addictions or mental illness. These modern lepers are the homeless, the growing mass of vulnerable men, women, and children. Like the Moravians caring for victims of leprosy on Robben Island and in Jerusalem, there are people here in our city who treat the poor and unhoused with dignity and show them mercy. They cannot work dramatic miracles like Jesus did, but they sometimes they do minor miracles and help someone find a place to live, get a job, pay their debts, or get treatment. There are people in this congregation who look past the stigma and use their time and money to help outcasts, to show love to the unlovely, and compassion to the afflicted.

Sometimes only one person out of ten who has been helped will return praising God and saying thank you. One out of ten. It can be discouraging that only ten percent of

the people you help even acknowledge what you've done, but we should remember our scripture lesson for today. Ten men were cured of their disease, their stigma. Ten men were given their lives back and able to rejoin society. But only one of lepers showed gratitude to Jesus. 90% returned to their old lives, but 10% embraced a new life with Christ. Why should we expect more than that when we help those in need?

CONCLUSION

Ten percent sounds like a small number, but in truth it can mean a lot. 10% is what we call a tithe. Commitment Sunday next week when we pledge our financial support for this congregation and our ministry together. There is an adage in organizations, especially in the church, that 10% of the people do 90% of the work. It's just a rule of thumb that is hard to verify, but I think we are doing better than that here at Home Church. We have many dedicated volunteers who cook meals, tend gardens, sing in choirs, play music, teach classes, provide food and clothing to the poor, support world missions, comfort the bereaved, take flowers to the sick, make candles, and dozens of other important tasks, but just imagine how much more we could do if we all responded in gratitude to God's grace. Think what we could do if we were more generous with our time, our talents, and our treasures out of gratitude to our Savior who has redeemed us from our isolation and brought us into the family of God. Just think about how this city could be transformed if we all had enough faith to reach out to the afflicted, neglected, and excluded people around us. I encourage you to do the bridges to engagement survey and ask yourself how can I help?