

September 9, 2007
II Kings 5:1, 8-15c; Luke 17:11-19
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
© Mary E. Baard

Becoming Well

Sometimes it is hard to know whether to be thankful or not. You've heard scenarios like this one.

A man sat dejected in the booth of a neighborhood diner. Along came a friend and inquired, "Carl, what's wrong? You look wretched."

"Have a seat," Carol said. Then he began:

"Two days ago my house burned down."

"Oh, that's bad," said his friend.

"No, it's OK," said Carl. "It was infested with termites and falling down anyway."

"Did you have insurance?"

"Yes," said Carl.

"That's good."

"Not so good. It turns out I was under-insured for full replacement value."

"Oh, that's bad."

"Not too bad." It means I'm eligible for a low-interest loan from the bank."

"That's good."

"No, that's bad. The loan officer is my ex-wife's new husband."

"That's bad."

"No, that's OK. If he hadn't come along I'd still be paying alimony and couldn't afford a house anyway."

There are a lot of versions of this kind of story, but each has built into it paradoxical elements of truth from the two sayings, "all that glitters is not gold" and "every cloud has a silver lining." It's a matter of perspective.

Consider today's gospel story of the ten lepers. From one perspective we think they

must have all been thrilled to be healed? How could it be that only one came back to give thanks?

First, let us remember what it must have been like for them when they contracted leprosy. Now, the term leprosy was used for a variety of skin diseases, but let's assume at least some of them had leprosy as we know it. In the beginning, their skin would start to swell and become lumpy and discolored. Over time they would lose feeling in their skin and it would be eaten away in places. As if the physical problems were not enough, there was social ostracism piled on top of that. In terrified response to the disease, the community would drive the lepers away and they ended up living together on the edges of society.

Ironically there is nothing like a little leprosy to break down social barriers. As you can see in this story Samaritans and Jews with leprosy were together. No healthy Jew and Samaritan would be caught dead together, for the enmity between their two peoples was deep and ingrained. But when you are a leper, you are treated like the "living dead" anyway. The distinctions that seemed so important before somehow slip away. So, in the story there are ten lepers...standing at a distance. They lift up their voices, saying,

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Most people ignored lepers. They were like the beggars on the street that we pass, hoping they won't talk to us and we don't really look

at them. Yet, the story says Jesus *saw* them. He had eyes to see and ears to hear. After noticing them, he simply says to them, “*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*” And the story says - *as they went, they were made clean.*

First, let me say that today I’m not going to consider all the perplexing questions about why some people become ill and others don’t, why some are physically healed and others aren’t. Today I’m just going to take it at face value that the lepers experienced physical healing. It’s a mystery but there it is.

We can understand why words of praise would have been absent from these peoples’ lips as leprosy entered their lives. But now? It would seem that praise might come easily when good things happen. Indeed, words of praise and thanks **are** spoken loudly but apparently by only one – and that one a Samaritan.

For the writer of Luke this is a crucial point, for Luke is concerned with social barriers. It would have been an embarrassment to the Jews that the one who returned was a Samaritan – a double outcast – a leper and a Samaritan. And yet it is this one from the farthest fringes of Jewish society who apparently most fully grasped the transforming moment.

What of the other nine? Luke doesn’t explore this question. In the biblical story we do not hear their voices. They simply vanish. But, were they just ungrateful oafs? Many years ago I came across a story written by Martin Bell, an Episcopal priest, asking just that question, “Where Are the Nine?” (*The Way of the Wolf*, p. 47) He suggests that, rather than simply dismissing the other nine, we consider some of the possibilities. He suggests that we imagine what might have been going

on for them. I have adapted his ideas for us today. Maybe...

- The second leper was frightened. It must just be a momentary hoax. He was sure that any moment the leprosy would return. So he just sat there.
- The third leper. Well, it’s simple. She, on the other hand, was so happy she went skipping down the road, telling everyone what had happened. She was so excited she simply forgot to go back and say thanks.
- The fourth leper did what Jesus had suggested - went to the priest and asked him about what had happened. They talked about it at length and decided they better learn more about this Jesus. Something very strange was going on. There was talk of setting up a task force to look into the situation.
- The fifth leper was hurrying home to his family, whom he hadn’t seen in years. Like a wild animal freed from captivity he simply went straight home.
- The sixth leper was already a broken soul. She wasn’t able to offer praise or thanks to anyone anymore after all those years of begging and being treated worse than an animal.
- The seventh leper did respond to God, looked up to heaven and said, “God, you still owe me.”
- The eighth leper was terrified to realize that his life had changed so drastically. He’d thought he wanted to be healed. But... He had been just a child when he went to live with the other lepers. Somehow he had adapted. The other lepers became his family. Where would

he go now? What would he do? Being cleansed posed a whole new set of difficulties.

- The ninth leper was offended by what seemed to her like cheap grace. Wasn't she supposed to have to **do** something to become clean? Some fasting?? Some praying?? It was too easy.
- The tenth leper was intrigued by this healing business and began testing his own powers.

Looking at it this way, I can see part of myself in each of these other lepers. From each of their perspectives their response even makes sense. Being thankful is not always as easy as we might think. Life is complicated.

Each of the lepers has been cleansed of the leprosy, but are they well? The story ends with Jesus saying to the Samaritan who returned, "*Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*" Being cleansed is one thing, but being well is another.

The question for the cleansed lepers is how will they live into this new way of being in the world? Does thankfulness have something to do with being well, not just cleansed? Could it be that the Samaritan leper who returned to give thanks already knew something about thankfulness even before being cleansed?

My suspicion is that the response of each of the lepers probably reflected the ways that they had been living previously within their own community of lepers. Maybe the Samaritan leper had already been a person of thankfulness. Could it even be that he had learned something about thankfulness in the midst of the leprosy itself? This is a deeply challenging question. Yet, we know that people who have lived in the grips of destructive forces and illnesses can sometimes

speak about deeper and even paradoxical experiences of thankfulness with radical clarity and soul challenging words.

There are many among us who have experienced the excruciating heartache of the death of a child. And yet each of you that I have spoken with has expressed deep thankfulness for having known your child. And, even when your hearts are heavy, you keep showing up to be part of this "whole wild cosmic adventure." (Bell) That's a form of praise for the mystery of life itself.

One of the most joyous and thankful people I know wrote the middle hymn we sang today. Her name is Dosia Carlson. I know her because she was a pastor at one of the other churches in Phoenix, Arizona, during the time that I lived there. She has since retired. Dosia has lived with polio and its consequences all of her adult life. These days she mostly uses a wheel chair. It makes her daily life quite complicated, but she is a pro at asking other people, even strangers, for help. It is interesting to observe, because, in my experience, everyone is grateful that she asks. Dosia creates community on the spot through her willingness to allow others, and even expect others, to help her. She is thankful for their help, and others are thankful for her openness. Dosia, in her very person, radiates a deep thankfulness. You don't have to be with Dosia long to know that she is well, even though she has not been healed of her polio.

Becoming well is not solely contingent upon positive life circumstances. Although we should never underestimate how destructive those circumstances can be. Becoming well has something to do with stopping and coming face-to-face with the presence of God – as the Samaritan leper did in coming to Jesus - coming face-to-face with the presence of God in bad times and in good times.