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2 Kings 5:1-17  
Luke 17:11-19

### To Get Ahead You Have To Turn Back

In 1996 the Urban Ministry Center's Room in the Inn program began in Charlotte, modeled after the original program in Nashville, TN. Now entering its 15<sup>th</sup> year, Room in the Inn is something that this church has embraced, an opportunity to provide food, shelter and fellowship to our homeless neighbors during the winter months. This first year of operation, 1996, my wife served as the food coordinator for the program at Myers Park Presbyterian Church and whenever my wife is involved in something that usually means the whole family is involved as well. So on one particular Thursday night that winter I left work to meet my family at church where we were helping to host our guests. When I arrived folks were already sitting down eating and I observed with amusement my then 6 year old daughter, Simmons, sitting at a table with a group of grown men, both homeless neighbors and church volunteers. Later that evening after we were home and I was putting Simmons to bed I remarked about her dinner companions and asked her if she talked with her friend Will's dad by whom I noticed she had been sitting. She looked up at me and went "huh? Will's dad? I thought they were all homeless". Then there is the story of the churchgoing gentleman who responded to his pastors' invitation to come to the front of the church to be prayed over. When the pastor asked him what in his life was in need of prayer the man replied "my hearing". With that the pastor placed his hands over the man's ears and began a long and earnest petition to God. When done the pastor asked the man, "So how is your hearing now"? The man replied "I don't know my hearing is not until Thursday".

I mention these seemingly unrelated stories to make this point, context is important. And in reading stories from the Gospels such as our scripture text for today I

believe context is not only important but crucial. You see, most of us want to read something like this and quickly figure out what it means and then go on to the next reading. After all, this is just one more healing story of Jesus and Lord knows there are plenty of those. But this is so much more than just a healing story. In fact I might argue it's not much of a healing story at all but rather a story about the kingdom of God that just happens to have a healing in it. So for the next few minutes I want to dig into this a little deeper and try to see what's really going on, lest we pray for a friend's hearing and miss his court date.

Luke says that Jesus was travelling to Jerusalem, in the region between Samaria and Galilee. Funny thing, there really isn't a region between Samaria and Galilee because they border each other, it's like saying the region between the US and Mexico, and even if there was such a place it would be a strange route to take to Jerusalem. So right away we get a contextual sign that something is up here. Luke has given this story a theological setting, located in the in between, no man's land, a place that is sure to be strange and different. They are on the margins, which is where lepers are. They have to be there, they aren't allowed anywhere else. And sure enough we get not one but a group of lepers. It's important to take a moment and look at just what the term leprosy might mean in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. Today the affliction of leprosy is a specific condition formally termed Hansen's disease. In New Testament times however leprosy was used to refer to any skin condition that rose to a noticeable level. A bad case of acne would qualify. It was indicative of sin, just like being lame or blind was and so the implications were not just medical but also societal and theological. Lepers were in violation of the strict Hebrew purity code which was relied upon to keep society properly ordered and oriented. The Law plays a prominent role in this story and the law abiding lepers keep their distance as the Levitical code required. Earlier in Luke a single leper went right up to Jesus asking to be healed, a definite Jewish no-no. And in both cases, the group of 10 and the single leper, Jesus sends them to present themselves to the priest as; you guessed it, mandated by law. We forget sometimes that Jesus was an observant law abiding Jew and in these cases where the situation clearly falls within a specific area of the code he acts like one. I cannot help but wonder if part of what's going on in this story is another example of the limits of law and how Jesus responds when humanity

and the law collide. I cannot help but wonder about our laws today, originally intended to keep society ordered and oriented. On any given day in Charlotte 70% of the men and women arrested are African American even though African Americans make up only 33% of our overall population. And in North Carolina an addict who in desperation forges a prescription to get drugs is a felon (and most of those committing that particular crime are women) while there is no domestic violence charge that rises to the level of a felony. All domestic violence crimes are misdemeanors with a maximum jail time of 150 days.

Now there was no separation of church and state in this culture and the lines between law and religion are blurred at best. The temple was the center of Jewish religious and political activity. But Samaritans had their temple as well. It was located on Mount Gerizim in Samaria and it was one of the many reasons they were so hated by their Galilean neighbors to the north and Judean neighbors to the south.

Jews didn't despise Samaritans for what they did or said but more organically for who they were. They were a mixed race people, created through years of intermarriage during the exile, and they practiced a blended form of Judaism that included aspects of many of the pagan religions imported with the various bloodlines with whom they intermingled. They were, as far as Jews were concerned, perpetually unclean and to be avoided both for their mix of ethnicities as well as religions. Of course in our story for today I guess that sort of uncleanliness is trumped by leprosy since our one Samaritan leper is allowed into the group with the other nine who are presumably Jewish. And since they kept their distance Jesus probably couldn't tell there was a Samaritan in the group so he sends them all to present themselves to the priest. This is important because as the other nine headed off toward Jerusalem, the tenth realizes that even if he isn't a leper, he's still a Samaritan, set apart even from the nine people he was with when they were all lepers. As the others head off for the Temple, wondering what they can offer Jesus in return, the tenth turns back, "praising God with a loud voice." And Jesus in turn praises the Samaritan -- not for giving thanks to him, but for giving praise to God. It may sound funny to us in our context but thanking Jesus would not be considered normal behavior. In Jesus' culture, thanking a superior would indicate that you no longer had need of them, and would end the relationship. Jesus does not

criticize the nine lepers who continue on to the priest for failing to thank him; what he says is "was none of them found to return and give praise to God," not "was none of them found to return and give thanks." The nine's continuing on to Jerusalem leaves open that they will continue in relationship to Jesus, trying to repay him for what he did for them. But the tenth one, the Samaritan, realizes that he will always be an outcast, and so he offers his sacrifice of praise to God on the spot rather than at the Temple, and he gives thanks to Jesus, believing that he has nothing else to offer him. I think we tend to assume that Jesus is being critical of the other nine, which seems a bit disingenuous since they are only doing what the law required and Jesus himself had commanded. We don't hear Jesus' tone of voice, his inflection so it is hard to determine his true attitude behind those words but I'm inclined to think Jesus wasn't so much scolding the nine as he was amazed at the one. There are many examples in the gospels where Jesus is surprised by the faith exhibited by a Gentile or Samaritan.

Those of you who like to push the envelope and bend the rules may find encouragement in this story because this is certainly not a lesson about being well behaved. The nine who do not return are the ones who do what is expected of a leper who has been cured. But they do what is expected because they can do what is expected - they are Galileans, they can go and see a priest. The Samaritan cannot. The Samaritan is technically the disobedient one in this story, though Jesus doesn't seem particularly bothered by this. Think of the societal rules we place on people who may not be able to follow them. Those of us with resources expect everyone to be punctual, even though they may not have reliable transportation. We expect folks to take care of themselves, especially if they don't have medical insurance, so as not to be a burden on society. Yet we don't consider the thousands of people in our own community who live miles from the nearest grocery store or market and have to rely on 99 cent hamburgers and cheap bags of chips and soda. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over four million children under eighteen suffer from asthma in the United States. In addition to genetic factors, asthma is triggered by air pollution, smog, dust mites, and cigarette smoke. Further, the cases of asthma have increased the most in minority and low-income neighborhoods. Another serious health issue is that of lead poisoning. The CDC reports that approximately one in twenty children ages one through

five have elevated levels of lead in their blood. Again those at greatest risk are minority and low-income families, primarily those who live in older housing. African American children have a five times greater risk of exposure than white children. Health care is a matter of barriers and access. Those on the margins receive insufficient care.

Jesus didn't condemn the Samaritan because he couldn't follow the rules. In fact he paid him the ultimate compliment. He declared him faithful and whole. Well. Saved. There is a clear distinction in Middle Eastern culture between illness and disease. The contemporary Western world views disease as a biomedical malfunction afflicting an organism but the world of Eastern antiquity had little concern for interpersonal cause and effect relationships. They were more concerned with illness, a devaluing of the individual in which social networks were disrupted and meaning lost. So in our story today the nine continue on to the priest so that they can be restored to society but the tenth leper, a Samaritan, had no such option. Yet he was still made well, was still made whole, was still granted salvation, a place in God's kingdom. Because he realized that if he wanted a place in the kingdom of God he had to turn back. He had to disobey Jesus in order to be made right with God. The Greek word *metanoia*, translated repent, literally means to turn back, or reverse direction. It implies a reorientation of one's life. We are called to repent and believe because the kingdom of God is near. In God's kingdom getting ahead means turning back.

The great 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant reformer Martin Luther was once asked to describe the nature of true worship. His answer: The tenth leper turning back. For Luther worship was all encompassing. I don't think he would argue if I rephrased his response to say that true discipleship, stewardship, worship and the Christian life is the tenth leper turning back. There is much for us to ponder in our text for today. Because in our modern Christian church we are the nine who obeyed the rules. We don't do a lot of turning back. We move forward, follow the protocol, get ahead. And yet we assume we are saved and we often assume that those who don't follow the rules are not. Doesn't matter if they can't follow the rules, we can and that's what it's all about right? Doing things decently and in order. Biblical stories like the one we have here today are

admittedly hard to relate to. We don't see leprosy much nor do we rely on a priest to declare us well. It's hard to wrap our head around this stuff sometimes. So I will finish with this little known story.

*Jesus came to Charlotte. He was on his way to Washington, DC where he would challenge the authorities on issues of healthcare, economics, immigration, gay rights and the like. He was passing through the area between the Myers Park and Cherry neighborhoods. He came upon a group of young boys probably around the ages of 10 to 12. They stood at a distance and called out to him in raspy voices, "Jesus, have mercy on us"! They were pale and slight of stature because they were all afflicted with asthma. Having mercy Jesus told them to go immediately to the doctor. So they went at once. On the way they realized that they could breathe easily and run without stopping. They were asthma free! But one of the boys turned back. He lived in Cherry, a neighborhood that though much improved is historically poor and under serviced by the institutions of our day. He went back to Jesus and praised God for his sudden return to health and thanked Jesus for his kindness. Jesus asked, "Where are the other nine? Were they not also made well"? The boy said "they all have doctors and reliable health insurance. My family does not. If I were to go to a doctor, even for a checkup, my Mom would have to take on a third job just to pay the bill". Jesus replied, "That's ok, I'm blown away by your faith in God. The other nine are no longer sick, but you my little friend are welcomed into the kingdom of God".*

In the name of the Triune God

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

Amen.