

16 October 2016
Pentecost 21

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Leper’s Prayer, the Children’s Thanks”
Text: Luke 17:11-17 (2 Timothy 2:1-13)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The good thing about having leprosy is that you knew you had leprosy. Or maybe that’s the bad part. Leprosy is a disease that doesn’t hide. When you have it, you know it. And so you know you need help.

There are disease not like that. Diseases that grow in your body silently, stealthily, and continuously. Gradually getting bigger and stronger and spreading, that when the diagnosis comes, it may be too late. That happens sometimes with cancer. A person can have no idea anything is wrong, until a symptom shows up one day and a stage four, nothing-we-can-do-about-it cancer is found.

Sin can be like that. The disease that infects our souls can grow silently, stealthily, and continuously. Causing bitterness, hatred, and despair; callousness, coldness, and indifference; covetousness, greed, and lust; dissatisfaction, apathy, and hopelessness; idolatry and selfishness. Sometimes there are symptoms of these things, sometimes they burst out of us. But sometimes it goes undetected and eats away at us from the inside out.

And why sin is so bad and such a dangerous disease is that while not everyone gets leprosy or cancer, everyone has sin. You have it. You inherited it from your parents. It is passed down from generation to generation, from Adam and Eve to us today. That is the diagnosis God has given us in His Word. And there’s no question about this either: it is terminal. You are going to die because of this disease.

The ten lepers we heard about today knew they were dying. They could see it, they could feel it, every day. And maybe they didn’t have many days left. So when the great physician came to them, when ***He was passing along between Samaria and Galilee***, this no-man’s-land where the lepers lived, they had a chance not just for healing, but for life. So they ***lifted up their voices***, they cried out as loud as they could: ***Jesus, Master*** - master of all creation, ruler, doctor - ***have mercy*** - pity, compassion - ***on us***. On us who are dying. Who have no hope but you.

Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. That prayer was going up a lot this week also because of Hurricane Matthew. As it roared across the Caribbean, ripped apart homes and lives

on many islands there, and then scraped the coast of Florida and Georgia, it served as a reminder that not only have *we* been infected by the disease of sin, but so has *creation*. A creation that often turns against us in chaotic, deadly ways. A creation gone wild, which prompted the governor of South Carolina to say: *Now is the time we ask for prayer*.

That's the good thing about having leprosy, or seeing a hurricane come your way, *if it drives you to pray*. If it turns you to God. But not just to any old god, or to gods which cannot help, but to the master of all creation, the ruler and doctor - to Jesus. The God who came to us in our flesh and blood for this very purpose: **to have mercy on us**. To have mercy on us who have no hope apart from Him.

For the reason why Jesus was in that no-man's-land between Samaria and Galilee is because He was on His way to Jerusalem to have mercy on us, to die for us. To die the death of sinners and so provide the cure for our disease - **the forgiveness of our sins**. That whether our bodies are healed right now or not, or whether a hurricane crashes into us here or not, or whether any other sin-caused trouble or catastrophe in man or creation descends upon us or not, **we have hope**. Hope that in the end, no matter what happens to us here and now, in this world and life, whether we die young or old, suddenly or slowly, tragically or (as they say) naturally, that we will be raised from the death of sin to a new life. A life greater than this life. A life peacefully beyond the reach of sin, disease, chaos, and death. A life forever with the Master of life.

Jesus, Master, have mercy on us, they cried out. And Jesus does. Even though when He says *Go and show yourselves to the priests* it might sound as if Jesus is giving them the brush off. *Not my job. go show yourselves to the priests*. But no, He wasn't brushing them off with those words - those were words filled with promise. Because you only went to the priests if you were no longer a leper, to get a clean bill of health. And sure enough, as they go to the priests, believing that they will have something to show them - or *nothing* to show them because their leprosy was gone! - they are healed.

And some this week received the mercy for which they asked as Hurricane Matthew stayed far enough off shore that the damage wasn't worse. But some, like my brother, did not have their prayers answered in such a way. For while my brother's house was not damaged and he and his wife are safe, their flight leaving Florida was delayed, meaning that they could not make their connecting flight to go to Madagascar with our Lydia, to help the people there. Their trip is over before it even began.

So did Jesus have mercy? Perhaps we would say *and* no. But the answer is **yes** . . . it's just that His mercy is different than expected. Mercy that maybe doesn't look like mercy now, but is, and maybe will be revealed as such later.

You see, that's the thing about Jesus' mercy - it's bigger than what we ask for; it's bigger than we know. Maybe we ask for mercy for one thing, or one area, but Jesus knows we

need a whole lot more mercy than that. And so maybe His mercy looks different and is given differently than we expect . . . maybe it even looks like **a cross**. No one ever imagined that our prayer *Lord, have mercy* would be answered by the Son of God dying on a Roman instrument of unspeakable torture and death. And yet it was. For no where was God so merciful than when He *gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life* (John 3:16).

So the lepers we heard about today received their healing, but that gift is but the sign of something bigger - a greater gift, a greater life, a greater mercy, that Jesus has for us. For while those ten lepers would all die, eventually, of something, sometime - maybe even leprosy again - the gift of forgiveness gives a life that will never end.

Which is the gift the Samaritan leper received. For not only cleansed on the outside, but with a heart filled with faith and joy **He falls on His face before Jesus** in thanks and praise. And Jesus says to Him: **Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well. But wasn't he healed with the other nine and already well?** Well, yes and no. Now He received a bigger mercy than what he asked, a greater healing. He was now a foreigner no more, but a child of God.

And so it is for you and me as well. What mercy is right now on your lips and in your prayers? What have you been praying, for yourself and for others? What hardship, tragedy, catastrophe, or chaos has caused you to cry out, *Lord, have mercy?* We did, in fact, pray that very prayer - the leper's prayer, the sinner's prayer - four times this morning in our liturgy. For all kinds of needs.

Will Jesus answer? Will He have mercy? Yes. It may not be exactly in the way we think or expect or hope, but He will mercy you. For you are no foreigner, but His child, made so in Holy Baptism. He has spoken to you His Absolution, the forgiveness of your sins. He feeds you with His very own Body and Blood - hung on the cross for you, now on the altar for you.

And we heard this from God today, too - from God through the pen of St. Paul to Timothy: ***if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself. If we are faithless - unsure, shaky, worried, fearful, forgetful of His promises and blind to all the ways He is working in our lives - He is faithful.*** Dependable, sure, reliable, steadfast, true. ***For He cannot deny Himself.*** For to deny you and the promises He has made to you would be to deny Himself, for you are His and He dwells in you.

So if the good thing about having leprosy is that you knew you have leprosy, then this too: when you are healed, you know you are healed. You can see it. You can feel it. But the healing of our sins, the forgiveness of our merciful Lord . . . though perhaps you cannot see it or feel it, you have heard it. And just as Jesus' words to the lepers to ***show themselves to the priests*** were words of promise, so too are these words a sure promise to

us. That you are healed. That your disease is not terminal. That though we will all one day die *because* of our sin, we will not die *in* our sin, with the guilt of our sin. We too, like the Samaritan leper, *will rise from the grave and go our way*. Alive. With a whole life to live before us. An eternity of life.

But that's not the only mercy our Lord has for you. His mercy is bigger than that, and yours even now. Mercy not just for eternal life, but for this life, too. For if He's done the big thing, the big life, eternal life, He'll take care of this life too. In mercy. Mercy for the big stuff and for the small stuff. Mercy that we receive, and mercy that we give. Mercy that we know, and mercy that we know not. Mercy that we ask for, and mercy that we didn't even think to ask for. Mercy that sometimes we can see and feel, and sometimes not.

So every Sunday we come together and pray for such mercy, for ourselves and for all people. And every Sunday we come together and give thanks for that mercy given. The leper's prayer, the children's thanks. And we learn how to pray. We learn how to believe. We learn mercy. The mercy of our Master, our Father, our Saviour.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.