

Sermon: Jesus heals
Luke 17:11-19
Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt

Philip Yancey, an American writer, describes in his book, *Where is God when it Hurts*, what happened to an NBA basketball player called Bob Gross; Bob wanted to play an important game despite suffering from a badly injured ankle. Not clever of course.

The team doctor injected Marcaine, a very strong painkiller, into three different places of Bob's foot.

Gross started in the game, but after a few minutes, as he was battling for a rebound, a loud snap! was heard throughout the arena. Gross did not realize this, and ran up and down the court twice more, then crumpled to the floor.

He felt no pain, but a bone had broken in his ankle. By overriding pain's warning system with the anesthetic, the doctor had caused permanent damage and ended the basketball career of Bob Gross.

Pain is our friend because it alerts us to the fact that something is wrong. Pain in our body, but also pain in our soul.

Here in Sh Baghdad I sometimes see beggars with leprosy. They have badly disfigured hands, feet, faces. Because they feel no pain to warn them when they step in a nail, or when they touch a hot plate.

Here in Egypt there is a colony for people with leprosy in Abu Zaabal, 25 miles north of Cairo. That colony houses about 750 patients, and another estimated 4,000 cured lepers are living in the adjoining villages.

Imagine losing your nose, your hands, your mouth, would you dare to face other people? This disease not only badly damages the body, but even worse, the self-esteem of the people.

1 Living in nowhere land

In our Gospel reading, we saw how Jesus met with some lepers in the borderlands between Galilee and Samaria.

Jews and Samaritans despised one another, and one important aspect of this hatred was the fact that they had separate but rather similar religions. Samaritans only believed in the first five books of the Old Testament, not in all Jewish Scriptures. They were also not as racially "pure"

as proper Jews – they had mixed liberally with pagans. And the Samaritans worshipped on this mountain, and Jews on another mountain.

We know how this works. Roman Catholics worship here, Coptic Orthodox in yet another place, and Protestants there – and there and there and there – and there.

Jews and Samaritans hated one another, so when Jesus and his disciples wanted to return from Galilee to Jerusalem down south, they did not dare to take the shortcut, through Samaria.

In order to avoid problems, they traveled through the no-mans land between Galilee and Samaria. This was the area where neither Jews nor Samaritans wanted to live, as they did not want to be contaminated by each other.

If you prefer to hate the other, the best manner is to create a cordon sanitaire – keep your distance.

In this area that was created to safeguard the purity of each nation, Jesus meets with the most unsanitary, impure people, with ten lepers. All of them looked awful, with their disfigured hands, feet, and faces.

These people were the outcasts of their societies, from Israel and from Samaria; they had lost hope, and their self-respect, even their identity. Only here, with their shared misery, Jews and Samaritans could live in a semblance of “peace” together.

They had nothing left to hope for. The laws of Israel said:

As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' "He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45-46)

In order not to infect other people, they had to live outside, far away from civilized society. And therefore, they could also never access the House of God. Even God seemed too far; they could not even come close to him.

By the way, I regularly meet with people who look perfectly healthy; but because of what they have gone through in the past, because of what people did to them, they feel just as disfigured as these lepers. Many of them have lost track; they do not know how to walk the road of life.

Internal disfigurements can be deeply disruptive of normal social relations with people, and they often lead to a strong feeling that not only people, but God himself, is far away.

And many of these people live relatively normal lives, they may even sit here in church. On the surface all is fine – but inside – you may feel like a leper. Not good enough. Not good enough for people; not good enough for God. How painful.

The Christian writer and Oxford-scholar CS Lewis called pain the megaphone of God. Our pain is the result of deeper problems, and God is calling us to solve those together with him. If you suffer from this, do talk about it. Do not hide the grief. And never think your case is hopeless.

2 Made whole again

The lepers in our Gospel had not given up all hope.

They must have heard rumors of Jesus and his healing power, so when he passed through their region, in desperation they called to him from a distance.

'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.' The lepers knew: no one could help them, but Jesus. 'Lord, Have mercy'. Kyrie Eleison.

Now the granting of mercy , the healing of sick people, is clearly a divine quality. These lepers were disfigured, but that did not make them religiously ignorant.

They knew that by asking Jesus for mercy, for healing, they were actually raising him up to divine status. Just like Paul later did; Let me just give one example; listen to these words from the introduction of the letter of St Paul to Timothy:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1 Tim 1:2)

To administer grace, mercy and peace is the prerogative of God and of Jesus Christ his Son.

When the ten lepers saw our Lord passing by, they knew, here is someone so close to God, he can give us what God alone can give. Mercy. Healing.

The temple was off limits for them, as they were impure, but God himself had come to them.

How merciful. If you find yourself too far a way from people, from religion, from God, then he comes to you, if you ask him to. He is God with us. Immanuel.

We, completely inadequate people, really do not have to perform well, be rather good, and climb up to him. He comes down to us.

Jesus did not waste words. He saw them, and extended his mercy to them, by simply telling them to go to the priests at the temple complex in Jerusalem, and show that they were clean from their disease.

The laws of the Old Testament were very precise about what lepers had to do when they thought they were healed from their leprosy.

The priests had to carefully check the person, and if all was well, the necessary animal sacrifices had to be offered to God. And the person who was healed would then praise God for his amazing mercy shown.

Look at the great confidence that these hurting men had in Jesus. This is extraordinary! People with great anxiety because of being outcasts do not tend to easily place their trust in other people. But they knew that Jesus was credible. His word is trustworthy.

Jesus tells them to go to the temple, and immediately they hit the road, believing that he would make them well. And indeed, while on the way, they noticed that they were being healed.

The word of Jesus, combined with their faith in him, had made them clean again. New people. What a message of hope for all of us.

And all ten, except for one, continued to the temple, to go through the examination process and to praise God for the great miracle he had done. They did according to the laws of Israel, the laws of the Bible. Even according to the literal words of Jesus. Obediently and faithful.

3 The healer

But one of them came back after he found out that he had been healed; he did not proceed to the temple to thank God. The one who returned was a Samaritan.

The writer of the Gospel of St Luke was himself a non-Jewish follower of Jesus Christ, and he must have had his own special pleasure in describing this event.

In the time of Luke, when he wrote his Gospel, many Jewish followers of Jesus Christ tried to convince the non-Jewish followers of Jesus, that they really had to adopt a lot of Jewish cultural heritage in order to become good enough for God.

The man who returned to Jesus was a foreigner, a man from another nation. If this foreigner would have entered into the Jewish temple complex, he could have gone to the special courtyard for the foreigners. But in that courtyard, a large sign, in Greek and Latin, read:

Let no man of another nation enter inside the barrier and the fence around the temple.
Whoever is caught has himself to blame that his death follows.

The man who returned to Jesus was a Samaritan. The worst enemy! But God had opened the door of healing and salvation for all people. The Jewish nation may have rejected Samaritans, but God whole-heartedly embraces all people who come to him.

Jesus did not see ten dirty, stinking lepers; and he did not see them through the prism of nationality – he saw the individuals in need, and he deemed each person worthy of help. And he has the same attitude even today toward you and me. We are not beyond help; there are no hopeless cases.

We see in bright terms that in the Kingdom of God, ethnic background, is not a hindrance for being reconciled with God.

This is why today the church of Jesus Christ consists of people from all nationalities, Jewish, Arab, American, Polish, English, Japanese, Dutch or Nigerian. It makes no difference for God.

And what we see is how the foulest disease can be healed by God, whether that is leprosy on the outside, or this rotten disease of sin, of depression, of feeling unaccepted on the inside. He welcomes all people.

Therefore the Samaritan man returned to Jesus,

...praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

Our Lord Jesus made a very interesting comment then. He said: 'Why did only this one praise God?'

Strange. Because Jesus knew that the others probably praised God as well – as they had gone to the temple to do exactly as the law prescribed. And it was also logical that this Samaritan man did not go to the temple, as he could only stand from far off, in the court of the gentiles.

So why does Jesus suggest that the only person praising God is this Samaritan who returned?

I think we get a glimpse here of insight in the character of Jesus. If people do not come to thank God through Him, they have not even begun thanking God.

The only way to properly thank God, is through Jesus Christ. Not through the temple in Jerusalem, not through a Samaritan temple, but through Jesus Christ, the God of heaven and earth is worshipped.

The fact that the man fell on his face – he prostrated himself at Jesus' feet - was more than humble reverence. It was worship, in recognition of the fact that in Jesus Christ, the Samaritan man had met with the one and only whole-maker, the healer, that is, with God himself.

In Numbers 16:22 we read that the glory of God was seen by the whole community of Israel, and they prostrated themselves. They fell on their faces when they saw the glory of God. This word 'prostrated' was also used by Luke now.

So when Luke used exactly those words for the Samaritan foreigner, I believe that he wanted to underline for us that

- in the eyes of God, all people who put their trust in him, are part of the community of God.
- And that when we meet with Jesus, we meet with the glory of God himself.

The Samaritan man worshipped Jesus. And after a while, Jesus told him:

Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.

Conclusion

That is what God, through his Son Jesus Christ, does for us. He heals our lives, our hearts. He puts us on track, He put us back again on the road of life.

- The Gospel has healing power for people with deep wounds on the outside and the inside;
- Jesus Christ is the extended hand of God,
- He wants to heal our broken lives.
- He wants to do it, and he can do it, because he is the Lord.

And thanks to this Gospel story of St Luke, we know that any person, even an impure Samaritan who meets with Him, may count on help.

You do not need to shout for the help of God. Even a soft whisper of your needs in the ears of Jesus, may count on his help. We are all encouraged to use this outstretched hand of God.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; Amen.