

David W. Lloyd: Healing and Recommitment

A Sermon by David W. Lloyd

Seekers Church

October 11, 1998

[Luke 17: 11-19](#)

Healing and Recommitment

On the way from Galilee to Jerusalem Jesus and the disciples pass along the border with Samaria. While on the border Jesus performs a miraculous healing, one of those numerous episodes of healing found in Luke's Gospel. Let's explore a few dimensions of this healing of the ten lepers and see if it tells us anything about commitment and recommitment.

First, a little bit about leprosy. It's hard to forget the sight of a leper. Leprosy, now known as Hansen's Disease, results in deadening of nerve endings, and victims frequently are burned severely because they can't feel the heat. The flesh cells of fingers and toes decay, the skin appears to rot away from the bone, and the finger and toe bones themselves fall off. The cells at the eyes are affected and blindness frequently results. For centuries people have felt disgust and revulsion at the effects of the disease.

And because of their disgust and revulsion, when combined with the fear of contagion, people have exiled lepers from communities for centuries, requiring them to call attention to themselves by calling out their affliction and calling out to others to stay away. It may be that such separation from human contact has been the most painful part of the disease. I'm a fan of the late Ellis Peters' mystery series involving Brother Cadfael, a 12th century Benedictine monk in England. One of the

mysteries is called the *Leper of St. Giles*, and it was broadcast as an episode on the PBS "Mysteries" series. To see this character wearing something like cheesecloth over his head to protect others from the sight, and to see lepers beaten by those who feared the lepers were approaching too closely as they begged for alms gives you a sense of the loss of community, of humanness, that befell lepers. You may have read James Michener's novel *Hawaii* and may remember the moving account of the Chinese woman who accompanied her master/husband to the lazaretto on the isle of Molokai. That exile was one of lawlessness, degradation, and despair.

Of course, today we have the new and improved model of disease that evokes all the responses we have had in the past to leprosy – AIDS. Remember the early 1980's when the initial hysteria over AIDS increased the homophobic reaction to gays and lesbians, and we feared contracting HIV from physicians and dentists who might have treated homosexuals unknowingly. AIDS resembles leprosy in the reactions it evokes in those who see people who have it dying from diseases with disgusting appearances that result from their weakened immune systems.

The Torah, specifically the 13th chapter of Leviticus, goes into excruciating detail about how a person suffering from a skin disease must be examined by the priests, and how one type of skin disease is declared ritually clean and another type of malignant skin disease is declared ritually unclean. The Torah grouped several different diseases – leprosy, psoriasis, eczema, some forms of dermatitis, and some forms of elephantiasis – under the name leprosy, and commanded sufferers to make their appearance distinctive, to cry out "Unclean, unclean," and to live apart outside the settlements. Some of these skin diseases affect and are affected by our bodies' auto immune system, like AIDS. That is, they may lie dormant in a person but break out periodically, especially after the mind and body undergo great stress. I wonder if the stress of rejection didn't make their diseases worse.

These ten lepers – we don't know exactly which disease they actually had – live outside the village in fearsome isolation and despair. It makes no difference whether the village is Jewish or Samaritan – they are not welcome in it. Somehow they have learned about Jesus and they dare to hope. They do not dare to approach him, to ask for healing. They do not dare to ask for compassion, which implies a certain equality of status. They only dare to call him by name and ask that he take pity on them, recognizing that they have no status. Perhaps they invoke in him memories of his friend, Lazarus, whose name from which we get the word "lazaretto," is derived from the Latin word for leprosy.

But Jesus' response isn't pity. He responds in compassion, in sharing the suffering of an equal. Jesus challenges them to go, in accordance with the Torah, and show themselves to the priests. If they are healed, the priest will order a series of ritual sacrifices, with lesser sacrifices if they cannot afford the cost of the birds and animals. Then they will be pronounced ritually clean and welcomed back to the community. In the words of [Margreta's sermon last Sunday](#): Jesus challenges them to have faith not as a noun or as something objectified, but to have faith as a verb.

Surprisingly, the lepers dare to hope enough in this man that they actually set out to show themselves to the priests. That, in itself, is remarkable. In the words of [Caroline's sermon](#), it's opening themselves to new wines, bursting their old wineskins. How many times, how many days, must they have looked at themselves hoping against hope that this time it would be different, that this time their skin would show signs of healing, that this time they would be cured. And each time, each day, they had to confront the reality that God had not answered their prayers, that they were still outcasts, rejected by God and by their fellow humans. Their wineskins held the old wine of despair.

And as they began their journey to the priests, they are

healed. Not surprisingly, nine of them continue on their way to Jerusalem. I say not surprisingly, because these nine were Jewish and the Temple in Jerusalem was the only place for the rituals. Not surprisingly also because the rituals were a crucial step to rejoining the human race. Can you imagine how determined they are, perhaps breaking into a run from time to time, with their faces shining with joy, tears running down their cheeks, thoughts of finally being able to embrace and kiss their spouses, their children, their parents and other loved ones as soon as they are declared ritually clean driving them on?

But one, the Samaritan, the one who is not Jewish, the one for whom Jerusalem is just another place to be rejected, the one who may have been alone even within the ten alone, turns back to Jesus. Praising God, he falls to his knees at Jesus' feet and thanks him. He risks close contact with Jesus even before the Samaritan priests declare him ritually clean. Jesus acknowledges this act of gratitude of "a foreigner", but questions why the other nine, his fellow Jewish countrymen, his fellow believers, do not return.

And then Jesus assumes the role of priest. Without requiring any examination, without performing any ritual sacrifices, he declares the Samaritan cured. He declares that it is the Samaritan's faith that has cured him, his faith as a verb, his faith that burst his old wineskin of despair as an exile. Jesus encourages him to go on his way.

That's the story. According to Luke, that's part of the good news. But when I have heard this story from various pulpits in my spiritual journey, the message has been that I should be like the Samaritan. I should feel gratitude, stop and give thanks to God for the many blessings I have received, especially for Christ's death and resurrection, which healed all humanity, including me. That message has felt like "oughtness," like a commandment, with some hidden "feel gratitude or else" attached. It has not felt like **good news**.

Maybe some of you have had this same reaction.

I was always the youngest in my school class; physically I was nearly a year behind other boys in my class and in sports was always among the last two or three to be chosen. I felt inept and somewhat outcast in something I wanted to do. It was as if I wore a sign during sports and gym – "If you want your team to win, don't pick me." Emotionally, I think I may have lagged behind, too. By the time I was a teenager I felt isolated, that I would say or do something to be rejected. It was if I wore signs – "If you want a good time, don't hang out with me;" "If you want a good time on a date, don't date me." I didn't know how to be a friend. I couldn't let anyone get close enough to see those signs I wore.

Later I outgrew my teenage signs, but I replaced them with my new secret sign, "At some point I will screw up and drive you away." Over the years my sign has changed. It now reads, "**Unclean! I have screwed up!**" Or, in Christian terms, I have sinned. Since sinning is at least as contagious as leprosy, I know that if you see my secret sign you will have to reject me. I'm sure Sharon is partially blind, because in 27 years of marriage she seems not to have noticed that sign. I never know whom in my family – our daughters, my parents, my sisters – who in the Church of the Savior and in Seekers over the years, who among my colleagues at work, may have seen my sign. So a part of me is always waiting to be rejected. Sooner or later people will see my sign, sooner or later they'll know how risky it is to be near me, and sooner or later they'll send me into exile in Babylon. Worse, I suspect that underneath my sign, I am still wearing those other earlier signs from my youth. And my signs are rotting me, exposing my putrid undesirable self down to the core.

Now I may be the only one who wears such secret signs. But from things others say, I suspect that some others wear them, too. Their secret signs might be the same as mine. Or they might be more specific – "I've embezzled money," or "I've

pressured someone for sex," or "I cheated my way through high school and college," or "I've committed adultery," or "I messed up my kids lives," or "I'm a hypocrite," or "I am manipulative and will screw up your head like I did my marriage," or "I attend worship but don't believe in God."

Those of us who wear these signs know that Jeremiah's message to the exiles in Babylon is written for us. We cannot sing the Lord's song in that foreign land. We stand together in exile, along the borderline of the chosen community – Galilee – and the foreigners – Samaria – at a distance from all of those millions of people who don't wear any signs. We know they want us sinners, to keep away from them, to stay at a distance. But we also stand apart from each other, because one of us is always the foreigner, the Samaritan. Misery only loves company among countrymen.

But Luke tells me there is good news. Jesus is always heading for Jerusalem, walking along that borderline. And maybe, just maybe, he'll hear me if I can find enough courage or hope to call out, "Take pity." My suffering will move Jesus; he'll really feel it as if he wears a sign, too. He'll be treating me as an equal, and that presents me with new wine, with the challenge of faith as a verb. Is he inviting me to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem? Is he commanding me to take that journey? Does he know how hard it is for me to act as if I'm not wearing my sign anymore? Has he ever been to Jerusalem and seen those priests, how perfect they are? Not a blemish among them. And nitpicky! They might find signs that I didn't even know I was wearing. They might tell me that I'm not healed at all. I don't think I could stand it if I wasn't healed and was exiled again. Isn't it better just to stay in exile, in Babylon?

Does he know how big a step such a journey is for me? My faith is about believing in creeds, in a catechism. Actually acting as if I'm healed, that's living in faith; is my faith up to that? My faith is just strong enough to sustain me in exile,

just enough so that I can hum the Lord's song, but not enough to sing the Lord's song.

Joining a mission group in Seekers Church is leaving exile, is daring to call out to Jesus, and is going to Jerusalem with a bunch of fellow lepers who are healing. Joining a mission group means agreeing along the way to show the signs of my healing. Joining a mission group means that along the way I'll undergo a ritual of healing, of burning my sign and the stencils I use to make new signs, I'll be restored to the community. Joining a mission group means discovering that I'll have help finding the right sacrifices along the way. Joining a mission group means looking for signs of healing in others. Joining a mission group means traveling with others who are healed, including those I might not even like, and creating a small community of humankind along the way.

Joining a mission group, returning from exile to Jerusalem, that's what commitment is about. Exiles don't have to make a perfect commitment, but only a good enough commitment, as Ron reminded us three weeks ago. Joining a mission group is a way of making a good enough commitment. Good enough commitment, good enough recommitment, is no more and no less than choosing to live with faith as a verb. It's about risking my wineskin, about broadening my choices, risking and learning from failure, and responding rather than reacting. It's about traveling through borderlands. It's about being willing to face what's in Jerusalem – not just priests but authority that can put me to death if I dare to speak God's truth.

Living in faith, living as if I have been healed, holds out the promise that my spouse and my children and my parents and other loved ones will welcome my embrace and kiss. Living in faith, living as if I have been healed, holds out the promise that I'll be restored to community. Sometimes I get so excited about becoming whole again, about rejoining community, that I forget to stop and give thanks. The good news in this story is that Jesus doesn't really condemn the nine who kept on going.

He asks where they are, and if there isn't someone in addition to the Samaritan who stopped. But he understands. Stopping, even for a moment, as I leave exile asks so much of me. It means putting off the rejoining of my family, my community. And what if stopping to give thanks interrupts the healing before it's complete, so that the priests will reject me?

Stopping en route from exile in gratitude is an even more difficult part of living in faith. For it means not only giving thanks for being healed, it means giving thanks for my life up to the point I was healed. It means saying thank you, Lord, for healing me and for all those years my flesh rotted. Thank you for restoring me to community and for those years I stood apart, wearing my signs and warning others about the dangers I posed. Thank you for becoming fully human and for those years when I was in living death, less than human. Thank you for helping me sing your song and for my weakness in exile, when I forgot the lyrics to your song. Thank you for accepting my good enough commitment. When I give thanks like this, I fall prostrate on the ground at the feet of Jesus.

Stopping en route from exile in gratitude is truly the sign of the foreigner. For the truth is, I find it difficult to give thanks for my past, for my secret, shameful self. The person who can embrace his or her past in gratitude as well as fully embracing the present in gratitude – that person is not I. Such a person is marked by grace. Such a person need not show himself or herself to the priests. Such a person is cured already, is restored to family and community and to humankind already. Such a person has left exile in Babylon and has already found the Promised Land, singing all the way.

Stopping en route from exile in gratitude is the good enough commitment I hope I make. Stopping in gratitude, throwing myself at the feet of Jesus like the healed Samaritan leper, is the good enough commitment I make when I share the bread and drink from the cup.

There is another dimension to this story. The encounter with the lepers occurred some time after Jesus had given the disciples the power to heal others and had sent them forth to preach the good news. So here's a syllogism for you. In committing to Christ like the grateful healed Samaritan leper, I have become a disciple. Jesus empowered disciples to heal the sick. Therefore, **I** am empowered; **We** are empowered, to heal the sick.

Now there's a scary thought! **We** are the ones walking the border between the acceptable religious community and the unaccepted. **We** are the ones the lepers call out to. **We** are the ones who tell them to show themselves to the priests. What does that mean? Where do we send lepers to show that they have been healed and can rejoin human society? And if they thank us, do we dare to tell them that their faith, as a verb, has healed them?

Commitment, recommitment is about accepting our power as healers, about accepting the scary prospect of having the sick, the homeless, the unwanted, the untouchables call out to us to take pity on them. Commitment, recommitment is about the willingness to take pity on them, to find the words that heal, that reunite them with the rest of us, that let them know they are loved as they are before they change. Commitment, recommitment is about accepting the fact that most of them will go on their way, so joyous and eager to become whole again that they have forgotten us. Commitment, recommitment is about accepting in Christ's name the gratitude of the few who will turn back, because we know it is their faith that has healed them.

Jesus commanded the grateful former leper to stand and go on his way. He commands us as the healed and as healers to stand, and as we do, as the ones healed and the ones who use his power to heal, we pick up our cross, and follow him

to Jerusalem.