

Sermon: Are we worthy of healing?

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Why did those nine not return to the source of their healing? The answer is of course as old as Adam and Eve — because they were human. They thought first about their own condition, then about their relationship with other humans, and maybe, finally, about their relationships to the source of their being.

Several a years ago a friend said to me, “I just can’t get comfortable in my own skin.” They went on to describe their life. They described comparison and competition with others to be enough. They spoke of expectations that they could never meet. They revealed that loneliness isolated them with their family, with friends, and even at church. They were describing skin-level life.

They were looking all around, at the people and circumstances of their life but was either unwilling or unable to look within them self. They wanted what the nine lepers wanted. They wanted a new and comfortable skin. They wanted to be accepted and approved of by others. They wanted the priests of their life – all those people to whom they had given power and authority over them self – to declare them to be clean, to be enough.

If today’s gospel statistics are any indication, then ninety percent of us live life at skin level. That is, we live on the surface. It is a “what you see is what you get” attitude. We assume there is nothing else.

At skin level our view of life is mostly determined by whether life is going our way and whether we get what we want.

Life is very much exaggerated. That is not to suggest that skin-level life is easy or pain free. To the contrary life at that level feels mostly like day-to-day-survival, is rarely peaceful, and leaves us feeling as if something is missing.

More than anything else skin-level life seeks to be comfortable; physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and financially. There is nothing wrong with being comfortable until we choose to settle for being comfortable rather than moving to a deeper place, a deeper way of seeing, relating, and living. Sometimes comfort can insulate us from the reality of life and the presence of God. It seems that only about ten percent, one in ten lepers, are willing to move in a new direction, to seek a wholeness that cannot be found in mere comfort.

For most of us when life gets uncomfortable, when things do not go our way, and we do not get what we want or expect then we begin seeking relief. We want the pain to stop and the situation to change or go away.

Too often we look for quick easy solutions, something that will make us comfortable again; something that will allow us to go back to life the way it was before. That is the life of a leper. That is life at skin-level. One day you are clean. Life is as expected. You have work, friends, and family. You are part of the faith community. The next day everything changes. The next day you are unclean.

For the ten lepers in today's gospel that means no family, no friends except each other, no work, and no temple. They were physically shunned, excluded. They were kept at the farthest edges of society. They had to wear shabby rags for clothes. Their hair was to be a mess and left uncombed. If anyone started coming close, the leper was required to cry out "unclean, unclean." That's how it is when you are a leper.

They want to go back to the way it was before, when they were clean, but they would settle for comfort. From a distance they cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." We can only imagine what they wanted. Maybe they hoped for a piece of bread, some water, a blanket.

Maybe they just wanted to hear a kind word. Maybe they simply wanted to be seen and, if only for a moment, feel real, feel alive, feel like a human being.

There is nothing comfortable about their lives. At skin-level each day of life is spent searching for some relief. I know that search and I'll bet you do too.

Regardless of our skin condition we know what it is like to be a leper. We may not have lived under the same conditions as the lepers of Jesus' time but we could each tell a story about a time when we just could not get comfortable in our own skin.

That is the leprosy of today. Today's leprosy is not a medical condition or a legal status. It is, rather, a spiritual condition. It is leprosy of the heart. Its symptoms have nothing to do with our skin. Instead they are things like perfectionism, gluttony, sadness, anger, pride, boredom, gossip, the need for control or approval, fear, being judgmental, restlessness, excessive busyness, grudges, prejudice, jealousy, condemnation, indifference, addiction. Leprosy distorts how we see and relate to God, the world, others, and even ourselves. Leprosy keeps life at a superficial level.

These symptoms, what the early church mothers and fathers called "passions," reveal a deep discomfort. As long as we deal with them at the level of skin, seeking cleanness rather than wholeness, we can never truly be made well.

Leprosy even convinces us that the most we can hope for is a declaration of cleanness. So we settle for being comfortable rather than being changed. We seek relief rather than wholeness. We desire something from Jesus more than we desire Jesus himself. That is life at the skin-level.

That is where we tend to live. It is where the lepers in today's gospel have lived. Nine of the ten lepers will settle for a declaration of cleanness. But there is always that one, that one who is able to look below the surface, to see more than new skin.

One leper, the Samaritan, looks past the exterior illusions of new skin. He sees a deeper reality and understands that healing is an interior condition. It is about the heart more than the skin. If he wants the healing and wholeness that Jesus offer he will have to turn around and go in a direction different from the other nine. And he does.

While nine lepers celebrate new skin, one leper celebrates the creator and restorer of new skin. While nine lepers hear the priests say, "You are clean," one leper hears the God-Man say, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

If today's gospel statistics are any indication then ninety percent of us live life at skin level. Jesus offers more. He desires more for us than we often desire for ourselves. What Jesus does for the one he offers to all? "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" It is not a criticism. It is an invitation.

Can we be thankful, and express that thanks, after the fact? Yes we can, and yes we should.

What were those healing experiences in your life that made life not only bearable, but enjoyable? Maybe you just failed to see the hand of God entering your life. Indeed those words of Jesus on that day are directed to us, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Only God knows how many times those nine told their story of healing in later years. Maybe what they did, and what we need to do, is to carve out a time where we express to God our thanks for God's loving acceptance of us as-we-are; and a time that results in a yet-stronger faith and more loving service to others.

It is never too late for us to give thanks to the source of our healing and being. Amen