18th Sunday after Pentecost (L28C) – October 12, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 17:11-19 NRSVue Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
Today's Gospel reading, this story of the ten men with a skin disease, is a familiar Bible story, and it has what seems at first glance to be an obvious point; namely the importance of being thankful. Jesus healed ten people and only one bothered to thank him. Manners, people! Jesus expects better behavior than that! It's very understandable that you would take that as moral of this story, because this used to be the Gospel reading for Thanksgiving. You've probably heard more than one sermon or Sunday School lesson that took that angle. I have too. But there is a lot more going on in this story than mere thanksgiving, and that can shed some helpful light on the nature of our relationship with God and enrich our lives of faith.

The first thing I want you to notice about this story is where it takes place. It's on the border, the region between Galilee and Samaria. Galilee is in the north, up by the sea of Galilee, and the people there are Jewish by faith. Samaria is in the middle of the Holy Land, separating Galilee from Judea in the South, where Jerusalem and Bethlehem are. Judea is also Jewish territory. But Samaria is not. The Samaritans worship the same God as their Jewish neighbors, and are descended from Abraham, Isaiah, and Jacob just like they are. But they don't recognize Jerusalem or its temple as the primary place where God is to be worshipped. They had another place, Mount Gerazim, which had its own temple until it was destroyed in the previous century. So you could say that Jews and Samaritans were different denominations of Judaism. But not like denominations today. Think back to the 1950s – some of you have a direct memory of that time – when Catholic and Protestant children threw rocks at each other just because they belonged to the "wrong" church – back when everybody belonged to a church. Or maybe think of our current cultural and political divide that has become so polarized. You know how you feel about people on the "wrong" side of that divide.

So Jesus is in the region between Galilee and Samaria as he prepares to go down to Jerusalem, because he'll have to travel through Samaria to get there. And we know that there is tension between Jews and Samaritans. In fact earlier in Luke, on another trip through Samaria, Jesus and his disciples are refused hospitality in a Samaritan village, and the disciples suggest that maybe they should call down fire from heaven to destroy them. Maybe they were hoping that could be the beginning of Jesus taking power as the Messiah-king they were hoping for. Maybe you understand that? Maybe you have had similar fantasies about the people you despise, the people who are ruining our country? But Jesus shuts the disciples down for that kind of thinking. And then in the following chapter he tells a story in which a Samaritan is the hero.

Now we're ready to think about what was going on in today's Gospel reading in this border region where Samaritans and Galilean Jews have regular contact with each other, as happens in any border region. Ten men with a skin disease are living together on the edges of a town or village, we may assume. We don't know it yet, but one of them is a Samaritan, while the other nine are Jews. But their illness has put them together in community. They were in the same boat, as we like to say, facing common adversity, physical discomfort and geographical isolation. And then Jesus comes by. His reputation has preceded him. They know he is a healer, and they cry out to him for help. So Jesus heals them. All of them, even the Samaritan. And then Jesus sends them to do what you're supposed to do when you're cured of a disease that puts you in quarantine. The law says that you have to go and show yourself to a priest, who will then give you the okay to reenter society. It's like getting your COVID vaccine card stamped to prove you've been inoculated.

So they all do as Jesus instructs, even though nothing about them has changed before they set off. They aren't healed and then they go. They go because Jesus told them to, because there is some measure of trust that this might work. There is no evidence before they go. There is only hope. Or maybe it's desperation, but that is a kind of hope and a kind of trust. And then somewhere along the way

their illness goes away. We don't know how long it took, or how far along on their journey they were. Then, the text says, one of them, when he noticed that he had been healed, turned back. Now, I'm going to guess that *all* of them noticed that they were healed. How could they not? But only one turns back. Why was that, do you suppose? Was he just a better sort of person, in spite of being a Samaritan … like that other Samaritan who stopped to help the man who had been robbed? Had his mother brought him up right, taught him good manners? Maybe. But let's think for a second where each of those men were going. The nine were headed down to Jerusalem, where the required inspection had to be completed. But where was the Samaritan going? Probably to Mount Gerazim, where the Samaritans' version of the practice had to be completed. And that would have been a much shorter trip. So maybe turning back for him was less of a big deal, while for the nine the prospect of turning back mid-trip with a long journey still in front of them, would have seemed more burdensome, maybe more risky. They were doing as they were told and it was working. Best to keep on. Trusting in Jesus was working! Because they were trusting in Jesus, weren't they?

Now I want to be clear that this is all speculation, though it's based on the information we have from the story, together with what anyone hearing the story in Luke's original audience would have known, and that I had to take time to study and then explain to you. We don't know what any of these men were thinking. And we don't know how well, or not well, they were brought up. What we do know is that this story is not so much about giving thanks (or saying thank you) as it is about faith. And we know that because that is what Jesus focuses on. It's the punch line of this story.

There's another element I want to explore briefly before I finish, and it has to do with the Samaritan's ability to see the bigger picture that maybe didn't occur to the other nine. Remember, the Samaritan was an outsider in this group of ten. And when Jesus passes by, he sees not one of his own people, not one of his own healers, but one of *them*, one of those neighbors who doesn't much care for people like him. The nine, on the other hand, would have seen one of their own guys, one their healers. Jesus wasn't the only healer active at this time. So when they were healed, it was maybe more expected, more normal. But for the Samaritan it was different. He had no claim on Jesus, no reason to expect help. And yet Jesus heals him. Because of who he is he is able to see mercy here. He is able to recognize grace, amazing and unexpected. And it is in times like that, I think, that we are more prone to recognize God at work. And when he does, and returns to Jesus, he gets to hear Jesus confirm that connection. Your faith has made you well. And "made you well" here is the same Greek word as "saved." Your faith has saved you, Jesus is saying, saved you for life that recognizes God at work in you and through you.

All ten of these men were healed. And I think Jesus could have said to any one of them, "your faith has made you well." All of them trusted him enough to go and do what he instructed them to do. But only one of them got to hear Jesus make that connection, so that they could see God clearly at work in their lives.

And that's where this connects to us. It connects to our gathering here each week to hear Jesus' words addressed to us, to see God's grace and mercy at work in our lives, which is of course at work also in other people's lives. But hearing those words, in liturgy and song, in prayer and in praise, helps us not to take God's blessings for granted, and to be reformed and reshaped into a life that it more than mere existence. It is wellness, life that reaches up to God in faith and out to others in love, as a conduit of God's ongoing grace and mercy for all people.

One more thing. When Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Get up and go," the word there is the same word used for resurrection. Isn't that cool? It's a new life the Samaritan has in front of him. And that is true for you too, dear people of God, and so those words are for you. "Get up and go! You are raised to new life in your baptism. It's a new life you have in front of you, even if you're 96. Even if you are facing serious illness. Even if the world is falling apart in front of you. Get up and go on your way! Your faith has made you well." And God is at work even now to make all things well. Count on that. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.