

## FAR-REACHING

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Chad Boorsma

Luke 17:11-19

Huge crowds lined the streets, and throngs of people watched for the procession that would pass by. That's what happened last September after the death of a well-loved monarch who faithfully served her country for over 70 years. The mourners had lined the streets for hours, and some, in fact, even for days; to watch Queen Elizabeth's funeral procession as it made its way through London. And when the moment came for her oak coffin to be pulled past them, they were unable to stop their emotions from showing. "I was crying buckets," said one mourner who had camped out for two days to see the moment.

Jesus, not after his death but during his life, encounters great crowds as well as he makes his way to Jerusalem, his popularity and reputation gaining as he goes. Some are intrigued by how kind and welcoming he is; traits vastly different from many of the other religious leaders of the time. Others simply wonder what amazing thing he will do next.

For example, when he warns about the Pharisees' hypocrisy, we're told that a crowd of many thousands gather, so many that they are trampling on each other (Luke 12:1). Crowds are also there to watch Jesus heal a man who was mute, and that mass of people are amazed at what they see (Luke 11:14). And of course, we can't forget the story of Zacchaeus, who longs to see Jesus, but cannot, not only because he is short, but because there are so many people who are gathering in Jericho (Luke 19:1-3).

Large crowds, however, are not what Jesus encounters in our passage tonight. As he continues on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus enters a village near the border between Galilee and Samaria and is met there by just ten men; men who no one else will go near. They have leprosy (or possibly some other skin disease). The diseased men are outcasts in society and keep their distance to avoid making Jesus and his disciples "unclean." These men see themselves as unworthy since the common feeling of the day is that they contracted the skin disease because of their own personal sins.

It's likely that these men have heard of the many wondrous things Jesus is doing. Perhaps they've heard of the times when others have been healed by him, including those with leprosy, or perhaps they have heard the amazing news of those who have been raised from the dead. The word of Jesus' miracles is certainly spreading throughout the area.

No matter the specific information that has reached their ears, these men waste no time with Jesus. They see him heading along the path, and they plead their case. "Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us!" Perhaps it is said in unison. "Guys, it's Jesus...he's coming this way. Are you ready? On three." Or maybe it was more a mixture of overlapping voices ringing out at different times. We don't know for sure, but what we do know is that they are in desperate need for healing, for their lives to be restored again, and they cry out in prayer, pleading to the one who can do all things.

Desperate need is what many refugees face today as well. In a past issue of the Banner, we read of one such family from Ukraine. Lika Roman, who partners with ReFrame Ministries' Russian-language outreach (formerly the Back to God Hour), tells of a family of three generations, a grandmother, her two daughters, and four young children, who fled war-torn Ukraine in the midst of the violence and destruction. They left behind their homes, their communities, their schools, and likely their adult male relatives who are back in Ukraine fighting to defeat the Russian forces.

The family, who are not Christians, arrive in a refugee camp in Poland with that familiar facial expression that one would expect to see in such a situation: a mix of fear and uncertainty. They don't know anyone and don't know what to expect, if anything, in the way of aide and assistance. "They were especially vulnerable to physical harm or even to sex trafficking," Lika said. "They needed everything, yet the thing they needed most (like the men in our passage) was Jesus."

Probably none of us sitting here tonight are refugees or people who are suffering from leprosy, but many of us are suffering from something; physical, social, or emotional problems that weigh us down. At times we,

too, feel like calling out in prayer: “Jesus, Master, have mercy upon me!” And if not us, we can think of others who feel as if they are “leprous” (alone, isolated, etc.) because of the challenges in their lives. These may even be people who are close to our hearts or those who are listed on the prayer concerns in the bulletin. At times like this, we may cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy upon them!”

Upon hearing the cry of those ten men, Jesus looks at them, immediately sees their desperate situation, and simply says, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” The men respond obediently, without questioning his instructions and without any hesitation, and as they go, their skin is healed. The leprosy, along with the shame and humiliation that go with it, are completely gone.

Some commentators describe this as an unmiraculous miracle. Notice that there are no words of healing, no laying on of hands, no pronouncements that they are forgiven or clean, only Jesus’ commands that they go and show themselves to the priests, a practice that was common for people with skin diseases, to see whether or not they had actually been healed.

Nine of them do exactly what they have been told to do. They head off to the priests, likely in Jerusalem, perhaps with a spring in their step, to confirm what they already believe is true: they have been healed from this horrible disease. They have their lives back. No more isolation for them. No more keeping their distance from others. No more calling out, “Unclean!” as they move about town.

And then there’s the other one. This man, too, realizes what has taken place, the miracle that Jesus has performed upon his life. Before he heads off to the priest, however, he returns to Jesus with great enthusiasm and shouts, “Praise God! I’m healed!” The Greek word used here in the text is *doxazo* (from which we get our word “doxology”), and the form of the verb means the action (praising God) is not only happening now, but it also has an ongoing aspect to it. In other words, this is not a “one and done” event. The praise goes on because this man knows that this healing will affect him for the rest of his life. That’s probably why he throws himself at the feet of Jesus as a sign of adoration, for he cannot thank him enough for what he has done.

Jesus looks down at this one man who is kneeling at his feet and asks, “Didn’t I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has no one else returned to give glory to God?” Jesus then says to the man, “Stand up and go. Your faith has healed and saved you.” The deliverance Jesus affirms here for this man is greater than just healing; it also shows the presence of salvation for him.

One of the things that Luke wants us to notice about this man, the only one who comes back before going off to the priest, is that he is a Samaritan. As some of you may be aware, the Jews viewed this ethnic group as traitors, foreigners, a collection of half-breeds because they had intermarried with pagan nations and rejected the temple and priesthood being located in Jerusalem. Some might even say there were “of another race” or “another kind”, people who were certainly not deserving of God’s hesed, of his unfailing love. The idea of God’s abundant mercy being poured out upon a Samaritan leper would be shocking. That would be reaching too far.

The other nine, who are likely Jewish, perhaps feel that healing was likely once they see Jesus heading their way, that they would naturally be the recipient of God’s grace as his chosen people. Not so for the Samaritan. The one who should not have received it, did.

The refugee family from Ukraine likely experienced similar feelings as the Samaritan. Here they are, away from their home country, in a foreign place, surrounded by unfamiliar people. What type of goodness and kindness can they possibly expect to receive? Their story is slightly different than the ten lepers, however, because they don’t ask for the help. Instead Lika Roman, the partner with ReFrame Ministries, poses the question to them: “Can I pray for you?” she asks. The family accepts the offer and after Lika prays with them, the family decides to commit their lives to Jesus, right at that moment, while sitting on their temporary mattress at the refugee camp.

A situation that seems hopeless now has hope that will last; hope, thankfully, that travels with this family as they move to their next destination in Finland. On the way there, their bus has a terrible accident, but as testified by one of the family members when she called Lika, she knew God was with them, and as they cried out to him, they could sense God’s protection and care. Lika even took it one step farther and was able to contact a pastor who could go to the hospital in Finland to pray with them.

As we think about the stories we have considered tonight, we may be led to wonder: what is it that allows a refugee family, feeling forsaken, to call out to God and to find peace and comfort? What is it that

allows a leprous Samaritan, who has been treated like an outcast twice-over, to cry out to Jesus and receive both healing and salvation? What is it that allows any of us to cry out to God, to have him hear our prayer, and to receive the gift of his mercy, even if the prayer is not answered in the way we choose? These are all simple prayers, really; prayers that have been whispered by Christians for centuries, prayers that ask for a piece of God's heart. Yet no one, the Samaritan, the refugees, or any of us, are deserving of receiving an answer to them, because we are all sinful people.

As mentioned this morning, today is Ascension Sunday, and one of the classic scripture passages for this day is Hebrews 4:14-16: Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Do you hear the good news in that passage? Jesus, the one who came to live on this earth as a human being, understands our weakness. He knows what it's like to be in darkness. He knows what it's like to feel like an outcast. He knows what it's like to seek the Father's mercy. All of these things were experienced by him during that Thursday and Friday of Holy Week. And yet today, because his blood has been shed, because the curtain has been torn, because the way to God is open, because he now sits at the Father's right hand, we can approach God's throne of grace and pray with confidence so that we may receive help in our time of need.

To all of us who deserve nothing, Jesus offers everything, including the gift of his far-reaching mercy and grace. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. ©Chad Boorsma