

The God Who Heals Us
2 Kings 5: 1 – 14 (reading #1)
Luke 17: 11 – 19 (reading #2)
Bob and Kristi Rice, IM 2023

1. Introduction (Bob) –

Salaam alekum! Peace to you. We are very glad to be with you, and to share from God's Word. Our scripture passage today refers to the skin disease of leprosy. During biblical times, there was no cure for leprosy. In fact, it was not until the 1900s that leprosy became curable. Leprosy, as you know, is contagious and deadly, which is why people with this disease are placed in isolation from others. Those with leprosy know how it feels to be rejected and isolated from community.

All of us received a small taste of what isolation feels like during the pandemic. We lived for months on end when we could not travel, we could not worship together, and at times we could not visit family members. We lived "outside" our normal activity and we were often estranged from those we love. Some of us became "untouchable" for a season because of the Covid-19 disease, and we learned how painful social isolation can feel.

2. Exegesis of Luke (Bob)

Our passage in Luke is a story that only Luke tells. Towards the end of Jesus' life, he begins a long journey from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem. If he were to go the direct route, he would pass through Samaria. We learn in Luke Ch. 9 that on this final journey some people in Samaria refuse for him to pass through their town because he is going to

Jerusalem. So he goes the long way around Samaria, which is what puts Jesus and the disciples in the border town here in Luke 17.

Jesus and the disciples encounter 10 people who have leprosy. The isolation and rejection from their communities has brought together Jews and Samaritans who would not normally live together in this region. They stand at a distance and cry out to Jesus. They have heard that Jesus can heal terrible diseases, even leprosy. They are desperate - willing to shout and risk being shunned and ridiculed again by others in the community.

Jesus responds to them by saying “go, show yourself to the priests”. We see the background to this in the Old Testament law about skin disease. Leviticus 14 describes a purification ritual when someone has been healed of a skin disease. The first step is for the priest to examine the person, when they claim they have already been healed. But these people in Luke 17 have not been healed yet! Jesus is telling them to go, asking them to trust that they will be healed. This is not what they had expected. But the people with leprosy agree and start going – perhaps their faith was strong, or perhaps they were just desperate to try anything. We find a similar scenario in the 2 Kings passage, whereby Naaman, the Syrian, a foreigner, desperate to be healed, overcomes his pride, and chooses by faith to dip himself seven times in the Jordan River in accordance with what Elijah the prophet has told him.

And so, even as the lepers are walking on the road, they realize they have been healed! Can you imagine the joy and shock? (pause) One of the people who had leprosy, when he realized he had been healed, turned around and came back to Jesus. Luke says that this man praised God in a loud voice and then threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. This man recognized that the healing came from God, through Jesus. Giving thanks

was so important to him that he interrupted Jesus' instructions to go to the priest, so that he could return to thank Jesus. Jesus comments that this man is a Samaritan, from among the people who do not associate with Jews and who had refused for Jesus to pass through their territory.

In this story, God is healing 'foreigners', people who are outsiders and looked down on by the Jews. Jesus says to the man, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." Jesus affirms the man's faith and gratitude, publicly praising him as an example.

3. Testimony (Kristi)

One significant ministry of our church partner in South Sudan is helping people to find inner healing from trauma and prejudice. Last year our team facilitated a healing and reconciliation workshop in a place called Gorom, a community of people who have been displaced from their homes due to conflict. One of the central parts of the workshop is recognizing that Jesus bears our pain as well as our sin. Isaiah prophesies in 53:4 that the Messiah will "take up our pain and carry our sorrows,...". When we are able to give over our pain, our bitterness, our hate to Jesus rather than holding onto it ourselves, God can bring healing. Throughout the workshop, we heard testimonies of people who felt freed from burdens in their hearts, or able to forgive people who had wounded them.

One woman shared that her parents had died when she was a child, and she was passed around to different relatives as she grew up. She now had children of her own, but she had always carried these deep wounds in her heart of being orphaned and feeling rejected. She had recently taken a decision to kill herself. But in this workshop she was able to share her pain with another person, pray together, and then give over that pain

to Jesus in prayer and ask for healing. She felt lighter and free afterwards. That night she had a dream; in the dream she had a rope around her neck, but someone came and cut the rope. She realized that it was Jesus, setting her free. She shared with us in amazement that Jesus had healed her heart. This woman who had faced rejection and marginalization in her family and also as a refugee experienced God restoring and healing her just as God restored and healed the lepers that Jesus encountered.

4. Application: Belief, Gratitude (Kristi), Attitude (Bob)

(Kristi) We would like to suggest that there are three ways that we see this story from Scripture speaking to us today, showing us God's heart and inviting us to live in God's way. These three ways are belief, gratitude, and attitude.

First, God is inviting us to **believe**. The ten people afflicted with leprosy were asked to take a step of faith that led to their healing. God is the same today – God can and does heal. We can not manipulate God or expect God to always do what we ask, but we can come in humility and desperation like these people with leprosy and ask God to heal and restore. Sometimes we in the west need to be challenged not to rely **only** on medicine and science, but to remember that God is the one who is **able** beyond the reach of what science can tell us or medicine can do. I experienced this myself when God healed me of an intestinal disease in response to the prayers of others – it was a little outside my comfort zone and made me realize my 'head knowledge' about God did not always translate to my heart or my actions. God desires us to be whole, in body, heart, and mind.

Our second application is **gratitude**. After the workshop I described, some of the

participants who experienced inner healing hosted 'coffee gatherings', which is how they celebrate something in their culture. They invite friends and neighbors to come to their home for coffee and they share how God has healed them. The Samaritan who is healed in this story in Luke takes time to return, to express his thanks, and to praise God for what he has done. **Gratitude** is an expression, a declaration of our faith. Take time to thank God, even thinking back to ways God has answered prayers, led you, or enabled you in the past. Jesus emphasizes that this man who returns to give thanks is a Samaritan, perhaps to highlight that the Jews, who think that they had all the answers and the right approach to worshipping God, had failed in this case to give thanks for their healing. It is easy for me to be like the other 9 people who were healed – intent on my destination, moving on to the next thing, not wanting my task to be interrupted. But taking time to stop and reflect, and to give thanks for what God has done is an opportunity to draw near to God, to seek God's heart and let him form us.

(Bob) Lastly, we need to consider our **attitude**, especially regarding those who are different from us. In this story in Luke, people who are considered "outside" of God's covenant are healed. As members of the human family, we suffer a malady called "ethnocentrism." We center ourselves and our people in relation to our ethnic heritage, the color of our skin, even our country. For many of us, we are proud of our identity, and probably we have good reasons to be proud.

One word of caution is that we do not confuse this pride, this centering of ourselves, that we not confuse such things with God's eternal Kingdom. Let us not forget that Samaritans were despised by the Jews of Jesus' time. One wonders whether the words and actions of Jesus and of His Father are meant to challenge our notions of identity and belonging. Sometimes when we feel that our identity is being challenged, we negate

persons and entire people groups. We see *them* as the problem. One of the gifts of living in South Sudan is that our own sense of identity and belonging has been expanded as we embrace new friends, as we embrace different peoples and languages and cultures, experiencing them as “pure gift,” infused with God’s goodness and love.

Who stands outside your group, outside your church, outside your community? What groups of people are being vilified or marginalized by our news outlets? Does God care about these persons, these communities, and even these countries? Are we living in fear, or are we as God’s people courageously creating a world of justice, peace, and love?

5. Conclusion (Kristi)

In conclusion, we know that all of us are broken people, and there is a lot of pain and sickness in our world. God desires to bring wholeness, to bring healing as he did to these 10 people described in Luke. God is able to heal our bodies and also our hearts, as he did with the woman in our workshop.

Are there wounds in your heart, body, or mind that need healing? And are there people in our communities who are like people with leprosy – isolated, marginalized, without hope? How can we show God’s love and give hope to them?

Let us cultivate our faith, our **belief** that God can and does heal, by reminding ourselves of these testimonies. And then let us **give thanks**. And finally, let us have Jesus’ **attitude** of love, compassion, and humility towards the people who are on the edges of our communities like these people with leprosy.