

October 12, 2025—The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. James Wyatt

Faith in unexpected places (part 1)

There's a verse we'll read next week, in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 18, verse 8, where Jesus says, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" I bring it up because that verse is surrounded by four or five stories that I think are meant to show us what faith looks like and point out that sometimes it can be found in unexpected places. And this story of the ten lepers is the first of those stories.

Well, first off, there's a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty when it comes to interpreting what the Bible is talking about whenever it mentions lepers or leprosy. It's pretty clear that the laws in Leviticus apply to a much broader range of things than just the bacterial infection we know as leprosy or Hansen's disease—things like mildew, for example. Because as soon as Leviticus chapter 13 is done talking about how to tell if a skin disease makes you unclean or not, it goes on to talk about what to do if you find an infection in fabric or leather, and what to do if your house develops a spreading mold—and all of them use the same Hebrew word that since King James we've read as "leprosy." And in every case, whether it's a skin infection or some kind of mold or mildew in fabric or plaster or the stones of your house, the point of the instructions in Leviticus is to get rid of it and make sure it doesn't spread. That's why these ten people with their skin disease—whatever it was—stood afar off: the law of Leviticus demanded that they wear torn clothes and let their hair be disheveled, as if they were in mourning, and cover their mouths and cry out "unclean, unclean" so people would know not to get too close, and live alone, dwelling "outside the camp," away from anyone they might possibly infect.

It's not hard to find parallels even in our modern lives. Those of us who remember the early days of the AIDS crisis remember how people who had HIV were treated—people were afraid to come near them or touch them or even care for them before this new, terrifying illness was fully understood.

And I have a vivid memory from my time in seminary in New York City, seeing a woman handing a coin to a panhandler like this as if she were afraid that his poverty might rub off on her.

On the flip side, I think about the early days and months of the COVID pandemic, as we huddled together in our households, avoiding face-to-face interaction with anyone beyond our families or pods, or for some of us, living entirely alone, fearful of the spread of a deadly illness, for months and months until the arrival of vaccines and effective treatments brought us out of our isolation.

So all of that is to give some context for these ten people who cried out, from a distance, for Jesus to have mercy on them. And when Jesus saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

Again, looking at Leviticus, this is standard procedure: only the priests can say for sure whether someone is considered clean or unclean. And I feel like all ten of these people showed some amount of faith, trusting that Jesus was going to make something happen—otherwise, why bother going to the priests at all? So they all went, and they were all made clean on the way.

And nine of them continued to do as they had been told. They were going to Jerusalem, to show themselves to the priest who would then guide them in making the sacrifices specified in Leviticus for their purification and thanksgiving. Let me say that again: they did what Jesus told them to do, and what the Law told them to do, so they could be made ritually clean as well as physically healed, and take their place in society again.

Except that one guy, the Samaritan, who "turned back, praising God with a loud voice, prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him." He chose to disregard Jesus' instructions, to skip over the elaborate ritual prescribed in Leviticus for making him ritually clean, and come close to Jesus, maybe even touch Jesus' feet, despite his ritually unclean status. He did

literally everything wrong. And yet Jesus ... commended him for his faith, despite the fact that he was a "foreigner." And Jesus wondered why the other nine didn't do the same.

So what did this Samaritan's faith look like? Well, at first, he showed the exact same faith that the other nine did: they all called out to Jesus, whom they called Master, in hopes that he could help them. They all started off on the road to follow his instructions, setting off on a journey that would probably take them three or four days. Like I said before, they all took a pretty significant leap of faith right there. But Jesus seems to be saying that abandoning Jesus' instructions somehow took more faith than following those instructions, and I think that's really interesting.

I think the Samaritan's faith, fundamentally, was in his ability to recognize God's presence where he didn't expect to find it.

I mean, all Jesus did—much like Elisha in our reading from 2 Kings this morning—was tell these people to go and present themselves to the priests. Just like Elisha, it's not like he touched them or said some magic words or even invoked God's blessing over them. It's not hard to imagine some of the other nine maybe grumbling to themselves like Naaman did, like, "That's it? I can go see the priests any time." But this Samaritan recognized that Jesus was the source of his healing.

And I think about this guy whose skin disease meant that he couldn't have face-to-face contact with anyone outside his little pod, and according to the Law, he couldn't approach God in God's holy place—which, to him, meant Mount Gerizim in Samaria, rather than the temple in Jerusalem. He could not give thanks to God with his "whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation," in the words of our Psalm this morning—because he wasn't allowed to be in the congregation.

But being healed, being made clean, meant that he could rejoin the congregation, he could once again behold God's power and glory in his people's temple—but instead, he turned back and threw himself down at the feet of Jesus. Because he knew that Jesus wasn't just some magician or wonder-worker; Jesus was the visible image of the invisible God. He didn't have to go to the temple to see God—God was standing right there behind him.

I think it's a pretty incredible leap of faith to recognize that the God who made you whole might not be found only in the temple, in the custody of the priests, but might be standing right behind you out in some nameless little village at the edge of Samaria, with the face of a foreigner.

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will he find faith in us? May God give us faith like that Samaritan's—faith enough to see the face of God and recognize the healing power of God wherever we might encounter it.

Amen.