**“Where are the Nine?”**                                                            
 October 13, 2019; Luke 17:11-19

One of the things that’s next to impossible for most of us to imagine is what it feels like to be cut off from the people we’ve known and loved all our lives—to be excommunicated from those relationships and that support--not because of something we’ve done, but because of something that’s been done to us.  Most of us can’t fathom what that would be like. But in the world of the Bible, that experience was not uncommon, and it was often seen in the lives of people with this one, glaring issue in their lives—they were afflicted with leprosy. Leprosy is a disease of the skin, one that causes a person’s extremities—their hands and their feet--to wither away.  And while there was nothing anyone did to deserve that dreaded condition, well, the word on the street was that it was God’s punishment for their sin. It meant lepers were shunned—because their disease was contagious, to be sure, but it was more than that--it was their pain, their loneliness, their fear nobody wanted to catch--so they were kept at a distance--forced to live outside of town--in leper colonies--made unwelcome in the religious community, declared unworthy of God’s love...  They were unclean outsiders, don’t you see--not to be mistaken for people like us--us healthy insiders. They live over there; we live over here. It’s just that simple. We are not like them. God knows we feel sorry for them, but you gotta be sensible about these things, right?--don’t go getting all sentimental--foolish--don’t start putting yourself and your family at risk, right?

Now, the lepers themselves challenged none of this.  Since they couldn’t work, they were dependent on the charity of the insiders for their care; so they did as they were told--dressed as they were told, spoke as they were told, didn’t cross the line drawn to separate them from those with unblemished skin (what we, in our context, too often--we might say white skin…).  They were obedient and subservient--people who followed orders--didn’t make waves. Meaning that when Jesus came to town, why, they played by the rules—stood at a proper distance, called him by his messianic title--and pleaded for the one thing that could pave the way to their healing—they asked for mercy, for God’s forgiveness.  Since it was sin that had “diseased” them (or so the world had told them), they therefore needed mercy...

So along comes Jesus--who looked at them--noticed them--and saw what anybody with eyes in their head could see—that they were all eaten up with leprosy--in need of every ounce mercy they could get.  So he gave them an order: “Go--show yourselves to the priests.” (In other words, show yourselves to the people whose job it is to keep you on the outside looking in--those who make sure the rules are followed…)  And we read that they disappeared--as obediently as they had appeared in the first place. Off they went--to do as they were told. Didn’t ask questions--didn’t ask, “Why, Jesus?” It’s because there was only one reason to go see the priest—to be given a diagnosis, a verdict: clean or unclean, insider or outsider, member of the community or beggar on the outskirts of town.  Those were the choices…

Now, that they went at all surprises us, doesn’t it?  I mean, wouldn’t they only hear what they’d always heard?  Wouldn’t it just be one more confirmation that they didn’t belong, that they had no place, that they were foolish to think otherwise?  Because what we have to remember is that these were people so broken by their disease and the status it conferred on them that they didn’t know any better anymore!  So eroded was their dignity that off they went to do as they were told, no questions asked. But we read that as they went, a miracle happened. As they made their way to hear yet another pronouncement of judgment, yet another rejection, they looked down at their arms--looked down at their hands--at their feet--and Oh. My. Goodness!-- they became clean again!

Their scabs went away--the color returned to their skin--the feeling came back—the numbness they’d felt for all those years was gone.  It’s like when you sleep on your hand wrong--how it dozes off so you have to stretch it to get the circulation going again--the pins and needles start coming, and then gradually at first, but then suddenly--you can feel again!  It’s like that…

So… all ten were healed, and we read that nine of ‘em did what?  Why, they continued to do as they were told, that’s what. Off they went to the priest--went to hear words they’d lost hope of ever hearing--but, incredulously, they heard: “Welcome back.  You’re in. Here, let me shake your hand.” “You gotta be kidding me!” I picture them bursting into tears--hugging one another--maybe even daring to hug the priest. But there was this one--this one who did not do as he was told--one who just could not keep going on down the road with the others.  Because when he saw that he was healed, he cried out at the top of his lungs--and turned on a dime--and went racing back to Jesus. All out of breath, he threw himself down in the dirt at Jesus’ feet and made this big spectacle of himself--praising God and giving thanks. He just sat there, lying at the feet of Jesus, able to see what the clean world could not see—that in this man, in Jesus, Almighty God had been revealed—and he absolutely refused to be separated from him--refused to be separated from the one person who had given him his life back.

So, do the math: Ten lepers healed of their skin disease; only one said to have faith.  Ten declared clean and restored to the community; only one who ran into the arms of God.  Ten who set out for Jerusalem to do as they were told--to claim their free gift; only one who turned back and gave himself to the Giver instead.  Ten behaved like good lepers, don’t you see, but only one behaved like somebody in love.  And it makes me wonder—how’d that happen?

You see, there’s something about the Bible that makes it painful to read sometimes.  It’s when it becomes a mirror--shows us the way we really are. Because when the mirror of this story gets held up to us, what does it show?  Well, maybe this—maybe that we are people who know how to be obedient, but who don’t really have a clue about what it means to be in love. Maybe that.  For some reason, it doesn’t seem to be a skill we can just dial in, like public speaking, like trouble-shooting a computer problem, like changing the oil in your car.  So we do what we know how to do, right?—we read our Bibles, pray, pay our pledge, and there’s nothing wrong with all that, nothing at all. It’s the kind of steady, law-abiding discipleship that has kept the church afloat the last two thousand years—what my teacher Barbara Brown Taylor calls, “the discipleship of the nine.”  And you and I are one of the nine; that’s who we are, right? But it’s the tenth leper who begs my attention—it’s this outsider, this loser, this one whose disease I so fear and whose passion confounds me and the one I may never see at all because he doesn’t need a priest to certify his cure. Who’s that guy?

Jesus asks where the nine are, but we already know where they are, don’t we?  They’re right here with us. The question is, where’s the tenth? That’s what I want to know.  Where’s the one who followed his heart instead of his instructions, who accepted his life as a gift, then turned around and gave it back again, whose thanksgiving rose up from somewhere so deep inside him that it turned him around, changed his direction, led him to Jesus and made him whole—not just his body but his soul, too?  We know where the nine are, but where’s the tenth? Where’s that disorderly one who failed to go along with the crowd--that impulsive one who fell on his face in the dirt--that fanatical one who loved God so much that obedience was beside the point? Where did that one go?

Not that I plan to go after him, mind you.  I mean, it’s safer here with the nine, isn’t it?  We know the rules--know who does what ‘round here...  But the missing one, the one who turned back, or was turned away, or turned against—where’d he go?  Who’s he with, anyway; what does he know that I don’t know? Where are the nine? Why we’re right here; of course we are.  But where, for the love of God, is the tenth?