

[Put on shawl]

Good morning.

What an honor – after traveling a few continents and many centuries –
to be with you today
to thank you if you've ever happened to admire me.

After all, I'm the guy who said "thank you" to Jesus
in that story you just heard.

I'm the one out of ten lepers who's held up as the paragon of virtue.
I appreciate that, but the truth is a little more complicated...

There I was with that dirty, disfiguring, stigma called leprosy.
As bad as the physical ailment is,
the social and spiritual aspects are even worse.
Cutting you off from everyone and everything.
Making you feel worthless and hopeless and ashamed.

To add to my despair, I was the only Samaritan.
Doubly unclean, barely tolerated by the other lepers,
banished into that no man's land between Samaria and Galilee.

Then Jesus came through on his way to Jerusalem.
Isolated as we were, we'd heard about *him*.
Jesus didn't have to route himself through our nasty neighborhood.
He didn't really even have to go to Jerusalem.
But he had such a sense of urgency that we could tell
something big was going to happen when he got there.
Something that would turn the world upside down
and show how things were meant to be.

But that's getting ahead of the story.
That first day I surprised myself
by joining the other lepers approaching Jesus, calling him "Master,"
realizing that I might finally be part of something greater than myself.

“Master.”

What a relief to entrust my problems – my life – to his mercy.

And even with us keeping the expected distance,
Jesus saw us – warts and sores and all.
He saw the lonely desperation on our scarred faces.
He didn’t pity or wince or make a fuss.
But simply said go show the priests,
the folks in-the-know at the temple, that you’re clean.
And you know what? *We were clean.*

But then it dawned on me.
Those priests didn’t want to see *me*.
I was no longer a leper, but I was still a Samaritan.
Still unclean in their eyes -- but not to Jesus.

That’s when I realized that there was a lot more going on
than physical healing.
(Hey, none of us are going to live this life forever.)
Of course I was thrilled to be rid of that leprosy.
But I wasn’t just cured, I was healed – outside and in.
I hadn’t just lost the scales from my skin, but from eyes too –
and I saw that I was worthy of love.
I was loved, without condition.

So, yes, I turned back alright.
I repented, to use a word, turning toward Jesus,
praising God in a loud voice.
I gladly humbled myself at his feet -- but not because I was ashamed.
For the first time in my life I wasn’t ashamed;
I was thankful.
And I told Jesus so.

You know the funny thing? Jesus knew I was a foreigner.
He called me a foreigner, but not an outcast.
He felt my praises were as good as anyone else’s.

Now you may be wondering what else Jesus said or did.
Was there some secret message he gave me?

All Jesus said was “Get up and go.”
Go on your way as I’m going on mine
to show the world that God makes all things new.

And that’s exactly what I’ve tried to do.
That’s why I’m here today.
To tell you in the midst of your crazy lives –
rocked by hurricanes and human suffering,
political stress and scandal,
and whatever burdens you each may bear –
to be thankful anyway.

Be thankful anyway.

You see, I’ve come to realize that if I’d never suffered leprosy,
I wouldn’t know the exhilaration of life without it.
So be thankful.
If I weren’t an outcast Samaritan,
I wouldn’t appreciate the sheer joy of being accepted by Jesus.
Be thankful.
And if Jesus hadn’t told me to “get up and go”
I might not have travelled through time to meet you nice folks.

By the grace of God, it’s being thankful that ultimately heals us.

So take it from me, your recovering leper Samaritan friend:
Jesus shies not away from the ugliest, most desolate parts of our lives,
those places of which we are ashamed.
Jesus longs to fill those dark places with the mercy of his healing light.
And then he pulls us up and out of ourselves,
to go share that healing light with others –
especially those who need it most.

Thanks – and I do mean, thanks – be to God.

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