

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 17:11-19

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The story of the ten lepers or the story of the one Samaritan leper who came back has a very distinctive sound map. The first part of the story is quite demonstrative and loud: "They called out to Jesus from a distance: 'Lord, master, Jesus! Have mercy on us!'" Jesus called back to them: 'Go and show yourself to the priest!'" The first part of the story communicates the distance between Jesus and the lepers by the quality of the sound. It's loud shouting.

The second part of the story is much more intimate. The Samaritan comes and falls at Jesus' feet. Jesus talks to him up close and personal. It is quiet, intimate and direct speech.

A short sentence in this story is, "As they went to show themselves to the priest, they were made clean." This is said slowly. It is the occasion of the miracle of healing. It is an opportunity to describe in tone as well as content the incredible thing that happened: "As they went, they were made clean!" Gestures of looking at your hands with amazement are appropriate.

When the Samaritan leper comes back he is praising God with a loud voice, as stated in the story. This is an indication of the volume with which this indirect discourse is to be told, so it too is loud. The other thing to notice about the sound characteristics of the story is that the sentence, "Now he was a Samaritan," is the shortest sentence in the story. This sentence gives the storyteller an opportunity to communicate to the audience the surprise that the man is a foreigner, a Samaritan.

This is also an indication of the audience to which the story is told. The story is addressed to people who would regard the Samaritan as a foreigner. They would recognize the radical distance that is being lessened or even eliminated by this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan leper. Samaritans and Jews were enemies separated by great psychological and social distance. It might help your listeners if they identified people from whom they are separated by racial, religious, or cultural differences.

In the background of this story is the story of Elisha and Naaman, the general of the Syrian army that conquered the northern kingdom (2 Kings 5). Both Elisha and Jesus heal from a distance. Elisha simply tells Naaman to go and wash in the Jordan, and Jesus tells the lepers to go and show themselves to the priests. In both cases the lepers are obedient to what the prophet tells them, and they are made clean. Jesus' story evokes memories of Elisha who healed his enemies.

Luke's story focuses on the aftermath of the healing and the fact that the only one who came back to give thanks to God was the Samaritan. In the Greek, the emphasis is created by a chiasm, ABBA. Literally translated: "Were not ten made clean? The nine, where are they?" The order is: made clean, ten, nine, where are they. This order creates emphasis on the contrast between the ten who were healed and the nine who didn't come back.

The Samaritan is a foreigner as was Naaman. The Greek word used here, *allogenes*, literally means "other genes" or "other race." This word only occurs here in the New Testament, but it is a famous word because it was found in the inscription at the entrance of the court of the women in the Jerusalem Temple. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, wrote about the warning signs in Greek and Latin that were placed on the barrier wall that separated the court of the Gentiles from the other courts in the temple. In 1871 archaeologists discovered one of these written in Greek. Its seven line inscription reads as follows: "No foreigner is to go beyond the balustrade and the plaza of the temple zone. Whoever is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his death which will follow." The word for foreigner there is *allogenes*, the same word that Jesus uses in reference to the leper.

This word was used by Jews to describe those of other ethnic origins who were forbidden on penalty of death to enter the inner courts of the Temple. As you may know the temple was built with a large courtyard, the court of the Gentiles, which surrounded the court of the women and the inner courtyard for men only where the sacrifices were made on the high altar. The word *allogenes* had resonance for Luke's audience as a word that described persons from whom Jews were to be kept separate. This also indicates that Jesus does not forbid the foreigner to come to him but rather welcomes him and celebrates him, recognizing that his faith was greater than that of the Jewish lepers who would be expected to be more faithful and grateful.

Jesus' injunction to go and show the priest is similar to the story of the healing of a leper in Mark (Mark 1:40-45). Jesus touches the leper, he is made clean, and then Jesus says, "Now go and show yourself to the priest and offer what is required as a proof of your cleansing." Jesus is requiring that these lepers go to the priest and offer themselves for examination as a proof of their cleansing. This was a legal requirement is the same which indicates that Jesus was following legal practice for the confirmation of someone who was made clean of leprosy.

The contrast between the Samaritan and the nine is told from a Jewish perspective. The normal Jewish expectation is that fellow Jews would give thanks and the Samaritan would not. Instead that expectation is reversed. The Samaritan's gratitude and faith are identified as the sources of his salvation. These are the words that Jesus speaks to him at the end: "Get up and go. Your faith has saved you."

Mark's stories of Bartimaeus and the woman who touched Jesus' garment in Mark end with the same saying about their faith. Their persistence in getting to Jesus demonstrated their faith. The woman sneaked through the crowd and touched his garment. Bartimaeus yelled and carried on until Jesus came to him. In both cases, they took action in faith.

The faith of the Samaritan leper was demonstrated by his returning to give thanks. It is not unlike what often happened in the temple when people offered thank offerings for a child, a recovery from sickness, or a successful harvest. The offering of thanks in this instance was the Samaritan coming back and giving thanks to Jesus.

This is a miracle story in the tradition of the prophets, but it is also a sign of the extension of the blessings of the kingdom of God beyond the community of Israel to those who believe. It is a pattern that is developed more extensively in Acts where it is Jews who first believe at Pentecost, then Samaritans with the mission of Philip, and finally the Gentiles with Peter and then Paul.

This story is a sign in the context of Jesus' ministry of the extension of the blessings of the kingdom of God to everyone. In this story the clear implication is that the blessings of the kingdom of God are offered to everyone in the world, including those who are our enemies. So whoever we would identify as an alien or enemy, whether personally or politically, the blessings of the kingdom of God are offered to them. And they can join on the basis of their faith rather than their biological or national identity.

This story is a celebration of the kingdom of God. When Jesus asks, "Where are the other nine?" he's not talking to the Samaritan leper, he's talking to the audience. When you tell the story, direct that question to your audience. They are invited to recognize, in the faithfulness of the Samaritan and his coming back to give thanks, the signs of true faithfulness, and thereby to transcend ethnic or national identity as the criterion of community.