

Being Healed, Being Saved

In today's Gospel, St. Luke tells the story of Jesus healing ten lepers, only one of whom thanks him for it. But before we dig into Luke's text, let's examine our Old Testament passage. It provides context for Luke's story, and offers its own lessons as well.

For the past several weeks, our Old Testament readings and some of our Psalms have been pretty disturbing. Our lectionary has grappled with the Babylonian Exile, an event that shaped the lives of the Hebrew people for centuries. In a nutshell, here's what happened. Roughly six hundred years before Jesus was born, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and installed a vassal king, Zedekiah. When Zedekiah tried to revolt, the Babylonian army returned and sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple of Solomon, and forcibly deported all but the poorest peasants to Babylonia. The Hebrews remained in exile for anywhere from forty to seventy years until the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylonia and allowed them to return home. Many did, but some chose to stay in Babylonia, forming the first of what became many Jewish communities in the Diaspora, a fancy word for the world beyond their homeland.

The Hebrews' exile was traumatic. Their religious leaders explained it by saying, as religious leaders will, that God caused his chosen people to be abducted from their promised land because he was infuriated by their idolatry and other sinful ways. That's why the Books of Isaiah and Jeremiah speak so eloquently to God's wrath, and why last week's Psalm 137 sings of the Hebrew people's despair and thirst for revenge against their Babylonian captors.

But today's passage is different. God tells the Hebrews who remain in Babylonia to build homes and gardens, to marry and have children, to pray for Babylon, saying that, "in its welfare you will find your welfare." Adonai urges his people in exile to rebuild their lives in their new home. In those normal, everyday lives, their trauma will fade and they will find peace.

With that context, let's turn to our Gospel passage. Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem, preparing for his final Passion. Somewhere between Samaria and Galilee, he's approached by ten lepers. In Jesus's day, Hansen's disease wasn't the only illness called "leprosy" – it was lumped together with various skin diseases and other afflictions. So-called lepers were exiled from the community until the religious authorities pronounced them clean. That's why the lepers keep their distance when they ask Jesus for mercy, and why he tells them to show themselves to the priests. They are healed when they act on his instructions. But only one, a Samaritan, praises God and returns to thank Jesus profusely for the miracle.

You'll remember from St. Luke's Parable of the Good Samaritan that the Hebrew community of Jesus's day absolutely loathed Samaritans. While there is no perfect parallel in our time, imagine someone telling you that Jesus healed nine Nobel Peace Prize winners and Adolph Hitler, and only Der Führer said *danke schön*. Hitler was truly evil and the Samaritan clearly was not, but that image may give you a sense for what Jesus's followers might have felt as they watched Jesus bless and dismiss the Samaritan leper.

So, how is this story relevant today? According to a new poll by CNN and the Kaiser Family Foundation, ninety percent of Americans think our country is experiencing a mental health crisis. The pandemic and the opioid epidemic are the biggest contributors, but ongoing public health threats like racism and gun violence aren't helping. According to the poll, roughly half of adults say they've seen severe mental health crises in their own families, including family members who were a threat to others and themselves or who engaged in self-harming behaviors. Over twenty percent of adults report feeling chronically lonely or depressed, and about a third say they felt anxious always or often during the past year. Those numbers increase for those struggling with poverty, the LGBTQIA+ community and people under 30, with adolescents at

particular risk. Suicide rates are back at near-record levels after two years of decline. All this suggests that our mental health problems may be far more widespread and dangerous than the conditions called “leprosy” in Biblical times.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus seems to call out the nine lepers who were made clean but didn’t praise God. In fairness, though, they didn’t do anything *wrong*. They just went to see the priests, which was exactly what Jesus told them to do. But the Samaritan, realizing that he has been healed, first praises God in a loud voice and then falls joyfully at Jesus’s feet. That wasn’t just what Jesus told him to do – it was way better. The Samaritan’s gratitude overflows into such exuberance that Jesus can tell him, “your faith has made you well,” a phrase our LORD typically uses to bestow salvation. As Bible scholar Fred Craddock observes, all ten of the lepers were healed, but only the Samaritan was saved as well.

This story foreshadows the Gentiles’ receptiveness to Jesus’s teachings in the Book of Acts, but it has some commonalities with our Old Testament reading, too. The Hebrews whom Adonai addresses have suffered in exile. Their cure is to embrace a foreign country and make it their home. Israel may be lost to them, but they can learn to thrive in their new land, grateful for what Babylonia has to offer even if it isn’t what they once knew.

The lepers also suffer, ritually unclean and exiled from their communities. So why don’t they all thank Jesus when he delivers them from their plight? St. Luke doesn’t tell us, but I wonder how grateful the nine truly were to be healed. Whether we’re talking about forced deportation or isolating illness, traumatic events leave scars that can take a remarkably long time to fade. It can be especially hard for people to heal if they focus too much on the unfairness of what they’ve had to endure. It can be perversely satisfying to show off our bruises and shout to the world about how badly we’ve been treated, how much we’ve been made to suffer and how

little we deserved it. Heal the injury or cure the illness, and there's no longer any reason not to return to the backbreaking, heartbreaking work of everyday life, the life in which Adonai assures us that we'll find our welfare, the life for which the Samaritan expresses so much gratitude.

To be clear, life has been especially challenging for almost everyone in the past few years. It's particularly tough for people with losses that can't be recovered or long-term medical problems that can be treated, but not cured. Anyone who's suffering deserves compassion and help. No one who's hurting should be ordered to stiffen their upper lip, walk off their pain and get back in the game. Our culture's cruel insistence that we always have to keep on keeping on no matter how badly wounded or traumatized we've been may be a big part of the reason why so many people are struggling. But I think this morning's passages can be an invaluable reminder of the healing power of gratitude and healthy routine. When we suffer fear, pain or loss – and everyone does at various points in their life – it's healthy to acknowledge what has happened and lament for as long as we must. But when we have grieved long enough for what was or might have been, we may hear God telling us to take stock of what's still possible. If we then rebuild as best we can, reclaiming our lives and praying for the welfare of those around us and ourselves, we may find the peace and healing that Adonai promised his exiled chosen people.

Human beings are fragile creatures. But our Creator has given us miraculous minds, souls and bodies that can heal from almost anything. Whether it's a broken nail, a broken bone, a broken dream, or a broken heart, we can ask Jesus to heal us, just as the lepers did. We can gratefully accept whatever healing he sends our way, trusting it to be enough to get us through. And when we do, we can praise God and thank Jesus, just as the Samaritan did, and hear our LORD reply, "get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." *Amen.*