

Thanksgiving, November 26, 2020
Deuteronomy 8: 1-10
1 Timothy 2:1-4
Luke 17:11-19

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

He was desperate. Nearly blind, nearly deaf, a pathetic, weak, and lost creature. He stumbled around, looking for a place to lay his head, perhaps for the last time. My neighbor happened to see him, this poor old Siamese cat who was at death's door. He fed the cat some tuna and called me over to take a look. The cat was so dehydrated and starved, there was virtually nothing left but skin and bones. We figured the cat was abandoned or left for dead, and that he was not long for this world. I have two cats as it is, one intentionally adopted from the shelter, the other, a friendly cat who wandered into the right yard. I agreed to take the starving cat to my house and let him stay in the garage. Honestly, even if he was fed and warm, I anticipated that he would not live long. I was prepared to take him to the vet to put him to sleep if it seemed like there was no hope. That was in May. Now, he still doesn't get around too well, but he cries at the door of the house because he wants to come in. He wants to be where we are.

The strangeness of this year didn't begin with the appearance of the desperate cat, nor did it end with him. Lockdowns, racial tension, riots, political lunacy, a new viral induced illness, a new normal; we have seen a lot this year. In some ways though, we have seen a lot less than we normally would, and there has been a lot less to do. This year has made the ten lepers much more relatable, has it not?

The ten lepers were desperate. In the ancient world, in particular in ancient Israel, leprosy meant being cast out from the community. See, the way certain skin conditions presented made the leper's skin appear like that of a still-born child. More than just an effort to prevent the spread of a disease, the social isolation was the result of a ceremonial impurity. The leper was literally treated like the walking dead, an incongruous existence somewhere between the living and the dead, neither fully alive nor fully dead. The impurity of the leper had nothing to do with sin. It had to do with the laws of the Torah which called for separation of certain spheres, one of them being life and death. Another related theme was the separation of the holy from the common. The leper, by virtue of an association with death, was not allowed to participate in the communal life of Israel, neither with God nor the people. They were quarantined. They had to maintain social distance, and whenever anyone came nearby, they would have to announce, "unclean", to warn an approaching traveler. This is something we have experienced a bit of this year, as people make roundabout like paths around each other. Arrogant moderns used to scoff at the dehumanization of lepers in the ancient world. It was easy to pretend that they would behave differently if they were alive at the time. That pretense has been exposed.

The lepers approach Jesus while He is travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem. This borderland location between Samaria and Galilee was a geographical no-man's land. Judean Jews did not recognize it as part of Israel. Samaria was the place where pagans lived, half-bred, apostate Jews who established an alternative religious system. Galilee was not looked on favorably by Jews from Judea either. As if being driven from the community was not enough, these walking dead men were stuck somewhere between the scorned region of Galilee, and the despised region of

Samaria, where Judean Jews would literally shake the dust from their sandals before entering their home territory. They were stuck in an abyss, as if they were lost within their own existence.

These poor lepers were desperate for restoration in their respective communities. We now understand what the impact of forced isolation really is. We understand how devastating it is for our family or dearest friends to be separated from us for a time, even in times when they are in desperate need. We understand how man is a social animal who finds it nearly impossible to thrive spiritually, morally, psychologically, and even physically when all is given up as an offering on the altar of health. We must ask ourselves how much are we willing to give up, and what are we really trying to protect? Life is a gift, but so is Christian community. Christian community is a gift of God's grace, not merely a political right. What it seems we all have been seeking desperately is the genuine living out of a Christian community that is both experiential and spiritual. Man is both body and soul, and the exercise of Christian community takes place in body and soul, within the visible body of Christ on earth, and the mystical body of Christ composed of all believers. Much of the tension we have felt in the church stems from the sense that the church is in a no-man's land. We all know that we are missing something of our community; those who have been away have missed us, and those who are in attendance know that there are some people whom they love who have been in a type of exile from the community. And we all want nothing more than to be together again as we were.

Our congregation is not unique in this; we are not an isolated incident. There are many in the body of Christ who are struggling through the same thing. Part of the problem comes in when we desire to make the church into our image, to force our ideal of what we think the church should be onto the community of believers, rejecting the reality of Christ's one holy, catholic church in favor of our ideal. We may begin to feel that we are wandering in a spiritual no-man's land because what is taking place in the church no longer feels like the community it once was. This experience reaches back to the core of man's experience in the world. Having life in the fullest sense, insatiable man reached for something more, and became aware of divisions.

One of the divisions man became aware of was the division between God and man. By trying to be like God, man discovered how very unlike God he really is. Man was drawn away from communion with God by his own lower inclination and found himself in a spiritual no-man's land. We all feel it, and we would like to be restored. We must not assume that the restoration has to take place according to what we would expect or demand. To demand a different kind of community would be an expression of rank ingratitude to God for the reality of the communion He is working out in real time. "Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."¹ We are the lepers here, the outcasts, begging for the Lord's mercy. Like the ten, we encounter Christ, who insists on being where we need Him to be, and we cry out loudly in desperation for restoration, for merciful renewal.

Jesus enters into the no-man's land for the purpose of finding a lost humanity. He comes into no-man's land to become no-man for us and to make us His. The wonder of the incarnation is that, in becoming the ultimate no-man, Jesus becomes an actual King with an actual Kingdom, and His Kingdom is one of genuine peace and genuine community flowing from His most genuine grace. He is at work in His Kingdom, restoring humanity to communion with the One True God in His incarnational flesh. No community exists outside of Him. Ultimately, it is Christ who holds

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 13.

His community together, and we recognize this as reality by faith more than by experience. However, we can only recognize this when we clearly see where our ideal ends and God's reality begins.

When Jesus encountered the lepers in no-man's land, He was exactly where He wanted to be and among the very people He wanted to be with; those who needed His mercy in order to be restored to the communities from which they had been exiled. He is exactly where He wants to be when He encounters us in His blessed Church, whether that is in His sacred Word, or in the visible Word of the sacraments. His Word is one of restoration and unity. His Word is one of community, the very community we so desperately feel disconnected from at times. However, the reality is much different than what we frequently perceive.

Of the ten lepers, nine failed to perceive the reality of the new Kingdom that was breaking out in the middle of their newfound joy. They are a bit like my two cats who take entry into the house for granted. Certainly, one can understand the enthusiasm of the nine lepers to do just as Jesus had told them. They went rushing off to the Temple so they could be restored by the priests. They would have to bring sacrifices and go through a ceremonial cleansing before they could fully live out what Christ in His mercy had done for them. They did not understand, or couldn't fully appreciate, that the fullness of God was not found at the Temple, but at the very feet of the Word made flesh which was tabernacling with them. Interestingly enough, Jesus doesn't dwell on the absence of the nine; He doesn't even question their faith which had made them well, just as much as it made the Samaritan well who returned. What we can see in the Samaritan is that the ones who take the community for granted, the nine, fail to understand where genuine community is found. They were returning to what they had lost, not seeing that a greater reality, a greater communion with God, was there to be grasped.

We are all like the lepers, lost beggars who have been found by Christ so that He could extend His mercy to us. All of humanity is in the same boat. Having lost communion with God, we long for communion with and community in something greater than themselves, but usually no greater than our own ideal. We did not find our community, the One who binds us into a community found us. If a blind and deaf cat can recognize to whom he should be grateful and cry at the door in order to come in, then those of us who have had the grace of God poured out on us through Christ ought to be able to recognize to whom we belong, and to whom we owe gratitude, and to whom we can turn to become a community. We turn to Christ alone. Just this past Sunday, I suddenly became aware of this reality as it played out before my eyes. While at the altar, I saw one of the more experienced members of our community struggle to make her way to the altar to participate in the Eucharist, the feast that is both deeply spiritual and deeply physical. Along with her, though unaware of the contrast, was little William Arnold, who came bounding up to the altar with all the energy of a young child. They were both returning to Christ's feet to receive what He alone can give. They were both intent on expressing gratitude for what Christ has done, and they wanted to be where He is. They wanted to be where Christ said He would be, both spiritually and experientially. When we humbly step to this altar, we are like the pestering neighbor begging for bread,² or like a persistent cat, crying to be let in. The One who is rich in mercy graciously invites us in and serves us.

If ever there was a time for us to appreciate what a great gift the Christian community is, this is it. If ever there was a time for us to appreciate what Christ is doing for us and what He has

² Luke 11

made us, this is it, for He has made us His own. If ever there was a time for us to appreciate His reality more than our ideal, this is it. Let us return to His feet to commune with Him there, thanking Him for His reality. O, give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, and His mercy endures forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.