

LEPERS AND OUTCAST

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Steven D. Spencer – Pastor Messiah Lutheran Church, Salem, OR
Ruth 1:1-19 & Luke 17:11-19

At first glance, there may not seem to be a lot in common between the Old Testament and the Gospel lesson for today. The Old Testament reading deals with the tragedies that struck a woman named Naomi and how her daughter-in-law, Ruth, remained faithful through good times and bad. The Gospel, on the other hand, tells about ten lepers who asked Jesus for healing and received it. What could possibly be the common thread in these two stories?

The Old Testament and the Gospel lessons for today, both deal with outcasts. Outcasts are people who just don't fit in, who don't fit our expectations. Outcasts are people who make us uncomfortable, maybe even frighten us. They might be loud or rude or obnoxious. They might even stink. Whatever it might be – there's something about an outcast that makes us want to forget that they are also loved by God.

It's pretty easy to see that the lepers of the Gospel are outcasts, but where is the outcast in the book of Ruth? In his last sermon before he died, Moses said in *Deuteronomy 23:3-4*: ***“No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever, because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.”*** Today's Old Testament reading tells us, “Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth.” Ruth was a Moabite. According to Moses, she should not be allowed to join the assembly of the Lord.

Not only was Ruth from Moab, she was a woman. The culture of the Old Testament was patriarchal – that is, men ran things and women had very few rights. Ruth really had two strikes against her. She was a Moabite and she was a woman. She was a true outcast in her day.

The book of Ruth is a wonderful story about how God provided a redeemer for this outcast. The love story between Ruth and Boaz wonderfully foreshadows the relationship of Christ with His bride, the church. Ruth eventually became the great grandmother of King David and a distant ancestor of Jesus Christ.

As to the outcasts in today's gospel, they are very obvious. Perhaps no disease mentioned in the Bible is a better icon of sin than leprosy. *Easton's Bible Dictionary* describes the disease this way:

This disease “begins with specks on the eyelids and on the palms, gradually spreading over the body, bleaching the hair white wherever they appear, crusting the affected parts with white scales, and causing terrible sores and swellings. From the skin the disease eats inward to the bones, rotting the whole body piecemeal.”

“In Christ's day no leper could live in a walled town, though he might in an open village. But wherever he was he was required to have his outer garment rent as a sign of deep grief, to go bareheaded, and to cover his beard with his mantle, as if in lamentation at his own virtual death. He had further to warn passers-by to keep away from him, by calling out, TAME, TAME which is, ‘Unclean! unclean!’ He could not he speak to any one, or receive or return a salutation, since in the East this involves an embrace.”

Even today with all our modern medicine, the word leper still strikes fear in the ears of the hearer. The lepers in our Gospel were the walking dead. It was almost as if the decay of death set in before the body actually died. Not only did lepers endure the effects of the disease, but they also endured the condemnation of society. Of all the outcasts who lived in the first century, Lepers were considered the most accursed.

Toward the end of the gospel we learn that one of these lepers was also a Samaritan. Samaritans were below the bottom rung of the social ladder among the Jews. Many years before Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, the Assyrians defeated the Northern tribes of Israel. They exiled the Israelites and brought pagans in to take their place. The Samaritans were the descendants of unions between these pagans and the few Israelites who managed to remain in the land. They represented people who did not keep themselves pure and holy. Of all the outcasts who lived in the first century, Samaritans were at the bottom of the social ladder.

Both Ruth and the Samaritan leper had a third strike against them. They were both sinners. In this respect, they are like us and all other people in this world. We are all outcasts from the Garden of Eden and here lies our problem.

The very sin that makes us outcasts in God's eyes fools us into thinking that we are not outcasts. It's the nature of the sin of pride to believe that we live in a perfectly healthy and normal world. In fact, when we judge others by the warped standards of the world we see around us, we develop a feeling that in some way we are superior to those around us. We forget that we are also fellow outcasts in a sinful world.

It is not until the Holy Spirit shows us God's law that we remember that we are outcasts. When the Holy Spirit shows us our reflection in the mirror of God's law, we see that we have a serious disease. Even while we live physically, our spirits are rotten with sin. Just as a leper is a dead man walking so a sinner is a damned man walking. When the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and shows us the truth of God's Law, we see that we are outcasts, sinners, spiritual lepers. As spiritual lepers we can't enter the city of God and so we are doomed to spend our eternity in hell.

After the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the law and we finally begin to feel the guilt we have so richly deserve, He opens our eyes and shows us the truth of the Gospel. When Jesus healed those ten lepers **physically**, He was making his way to Jerusalem to take on their **spiritual** leprosy to the cross, and not just **their** spiritual leprosy but ours. From the time He shed blood at His birth to the time His blood was poured out at his death, Jesus carried the spiritual leprosy of the entire world. In Jerusalem He would offer Himself and would become the cure for this disease by sacrificing himself on the cross. His resurrection from the dead brings the cure to the entire world.

The story of the Samaritan leper actually has three miracles. There is the obvious healing miracle; Jesus healed the leprosy. Then there is the miracle of breaking down the barrier between Jew and Samaritan; Jesus knew this man was a foreigner, but He healed him anyway. Finally, there is the miracle of conversion; the healed Samaritan worshiped Jesus with thanksgiving. God opened the kingdom of heaven to this double outcast, this Samaritan leper. He welcomed him into His family.

Most of us have heard this story many times during our lives, but have we thought about the outcasts in our lives?

Who are the outcasts in your life? Who are the people that make your life challenging? Who might be watching the love of God at work in your life? When Jesus healed the Samaritan leper, He not only opened the Gospel to Samaritans, but He opened it to all people including those who live in Western Oregon in the

year 2010. As God heals the leprosy of your sin, His love will fill you and overflow from you so that the lepers around you will learn about the savior who healed you. As people who **were** spiritual lepers, let us celebrate the love of God who healed us and share this good news with others. Let us recognize His goodness, give thanks for His compassion, and praise His holy name. We too can join with the Samaritan leper and praise God with a loud voice and so we should. For God has made us clean and declared that all our sins are forgiven for Jesus sake, now and forevermore in Jesus name, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN!

