

But the *Bible* Says....

[Text - Luke 17:11-19]

Pastor Dave Shackle

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In ancient Hebrew Law, there are a vast number of rigorous rules dealing with *leprosy*. These rules cover a wide variety of skin diseases, and not just what we today call "Hansen's Disease." The intent of these strict rules was to protect communities from potential infection. If a person had a visible skin condition, he or she would be ostracized from their community until that condition went away. The Law mandated that anyone with "leprosy" was to keep a far distance from others; and if other people came near them, they were required to shout-out, "Unclean, unclean," so that the "clean" people wouldn't contaminate themselves by getting too close. Since it was often assumed that these "lepers" were being punished for some sin they had committed, their quarantine was particularly harsh, and in some cases they were still shunned even after their condition was cured. And their local priests were the only people who could pronounce those "lepers" as being completely "cured," thereby ending their enforced exile.

In this morning's New Testament reading, as Jesus travels between Samaria and Galilee, he is met by ten people with leprosy. Being considered "untouchables" they stand at a safe distance and call out, "Jesus, have mercy on us!" Jesus says to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they go, they are cleansed of their leprosy. Nine of those who are cleansed, obediently continue their journey to see the priest. After all, that's what Jesus told them to do, and that's what their religious law expected of them. They were to show themselves to the priest, and then complete an eight day ritual of bathing, shaving, and sacrifice, so that they could be pronounced "completely clean."

Nine out of the ten choose to follow that system of ritual cleansing prescribed in the 14th Chapter of *Leviticus*: an intricately detailed system that's completed in eight days - "Eight Days to Clear, Clean, Beautiful Skin." [That has a nice ring to it!] Or how about this: "The Bible's Precise Prescriptions for Life's Most Perplexing Problems"? After all, even though the steps laid out in *Leviticus* make the Affordable Health Care Act seem simple, at least there's a God-given guarantee that the system will work. There's even a sliding scale for those who can't afford two unblemished lambs or three-tenths of an ephah for flour: one lamb and one tenth will do the trick!

While I find it fascinating that our *Bible* contains a wide variety of curious and complex formulas for fixing things, it's also a bit unsettling that a "religious" person doesn't have to look too far, or dig too deep, to find a concise, convenient formula to obediently follow. A formula that can certainly bring a sense of personal satisfaction or achievement, yet which can also impede that person's genuine spiritual growth. In our

New Testament reading, nine out of ten lepers follow Jesus' words, obey the prescribed system of religious behavior, and go contentedly on their way. However, one of those ten chooses to *disobey*! He not only circumvents the system, he also disregards the specific words of Jesus himself! This individual allows his emotions and his gratitude to over-ride that prescribed, clear-cut formula of response. Instead, he responds from the heart - with an overwhelming desire to return and give thanks to the One who has restored him to health and wholeness.

There are definitely times in Life, when it's easier to follow a simple set of words lifted from the Bible, rather than striving to be faithful to the *Living Word* embodied in Jesus Christ. It's certainly more comfortable to parrot the pat answers of conventional wisdom, than to prayerfully wrestle with the deeper wisdom of the Divine Spirit. And it's far easier to fall-back on rote answers pulled from the Holy Scriptures, than to be pulled into a vibrant relationship with the Holy One - the One who challenges us to love "with all our heart, soul, strength, *and mind!*"

Healthy *relationships*, whether they be with other people or with God, challenge us to think, to learn, to grow - to become a better person; while hard-set *rules* merely call for our blind obedience. And one potentially dangerous problem with blind obedience, is that it can lead to a rigid religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism - be it Jewish, Islamic or Christian - says to people: "Follow these specific rules; and make *sure* that other people do the same!" Fundamentalism fashions a god that is small enough to keep contained in a book, yet powerful enough to tell you and everyone else exactly what we should or shouldn't do. Fundamentally, fundamentalism takes the fun and the freedom out of faith, replacing them with a strict sternness and hardheartedness that is cold, calculating and completely joyless. It encourages people to blindly follow orders - obeying selected words pulled from Scripture, rather than seeking to understand the genuine Spirit or Purpose *behind* those words.

This is what the one who returns to give thanks to Jesus does. He seeks the deeper truth behind this amazing person who has changed his life. Jesus notes that this man is a *foreigner* - a Samaritan - one whose faithfulness would be suspect to the Hebrew religious community. Yet Jesus says to him, "Get up and go your way, your *faith* has made you well!" Of the ten people who were cleansed, only one of them knew for certain that he was now completely well and whole; because he was willing to set aside the prescribed *rules*, in order to return and relate to the source of his healing.

I think it's interesting how at the beginning of this encounter, the Samaritan and the other nine keep a safe distance from Jesus. None of them presume to break the social stigma surrounding their affliction. Yet when this Samaritan returns, he not only comes close, he literally throws himself at Jesus' feet; most likely *touching* him, even though he hasn't even begun that required eight day cleansing ritual! It's as though one of the added benefits of this healing was to break a formidable social barrier - to help this individual move from a horrible sense of isolation, into a wholesome spirit of intimacy with his Jewish brother, Jesus the Christ. So perhaps that's why the Samaritan came

back - not simply because he felt obliged to say "thank you," but because of a deep desire to get to know and understand this gracious man of God.

I also think it's interesting to speculate about what happens to this man who returns. Jesus tells him to "get up and go on his way"; however, Jesus had earlier told him to "go and show himself to the priest" - but the man didn't do it. When he realizes that Jesus has effected his healing, he responds with profound gratitude; he returns with profound joy and faithful thanksgiving. So maybe, when he's told to "go on *his way*", the "way" this man chooses, is to follow in the Way of Jesus Christ. Of course you and I don't know what he does, but we can certainly consider what *we* might do today.

On our journey through Life, you and I are also free to "get up and go on our way." We could choose the way of complacent obedience - simply following the teachings of religious conformity and pursuing the path of unchallenged thinking. Or we can listen to our hearts, and to the heart of Divine Love - which calls us beyond mere obedience, into genuine *faithfulness*:

A faithfulness that will challenge the rules, in order to champion those less fortunate;

A faithfulness that is willing to stand by and walk with those who religion or society often cast aside;

A faithfulness that will take on the hard work of wrestling with Life's complex and complicated problems;

A faithfulness which follows the call to "Love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind; *and* to love our neighbor as ourselves."

According to Jesus, this kind of faithfulness not only *heals* us, but also makes us truly *whole!*