

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity  
Luke 17:11-19

You've probably heard one of my favorite Luther quotes before, but it applies extremely well to the Gospel text and our current situation. "The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Every one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but every one must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me. Therefore every one must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian."<sup>1</sup>

It's certainly true, as Luther asserts, that we all must face death alone. If there's a word for our current condition, it is aloneness, or loneliness. The precautions taken against a pandemic that kills less frequently than the flu has isolated people and they no longer have the human connection they so desperately need. However, whether you get COVID-19 or not, you will face death.

I don't wish anyone to get COVID-19. Even though it is less lethal than the flu, it can still have lethal consequences. But regardless of whether you contract COVID or not, you live in the midst of lethal consequences. The consequences of sin is death. Our first parents suffered this consequence by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You inherit their condition and the consequence of their sin, namely, death. (Romans 5:12) Every illness and disease is a sign of the death that dwells in your mortal bodies.

Leprosy, like every other disease, is a sign of death. It is sin and death being worked out in your flesh. Leprosy in the time of the new testament was worse than other signs of death. Not only was it a sign of your sin, but it cut you off from the community and from the temple. You were cut off from everyone you knew, including family and those you grew up with, and worse, you were cut off from the presence of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 51: Sermons I, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 70.

How many people are cut off from family, friends, and God in our current handling of this epidemic? If you think of people like Larry Maudlin or Margaret Dickenson, you might have an idea of what it was like to be a leper in the time of Jesus. They're lonely and cut off from everyone they know. There's very little hope left in a situation like that.

But Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God and performed all kinds of healing miracles. The lepers must have heard about what Jesus was doing and cried out, "Jesus, master, have mercy on us." (v. 13) They weren't allowed to come close to Jesus or come into the town that Jesus was entering. But they cried out from a distance.

Jesus says, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." (v. 14) In the Old and New testaments, leprosy could range from a skin rash to what we know today as Hansen's Disease. When, or if, it cleared up, you had to show yourself to the priest to be certified as cured so that you could re-enter the community of both family and faith. They would've known that Jesus wouldn't command that unless He healed them. At some point, which the text doesn't tell us, they would have noticed they were healed. Nine of the lepers went on to the temple to be certified as clean again. One, a Samaritan, returned to Jesus, the temple made without hands, to show his gratitude.

The Samaritan understood what the other nine, who were most likely Jews, did not. Jesus is God! I believe that Jesus' incredulity wasn't because the nine didn't come back to give thanks, but that the Samaritan was the only one to recognize Jesus as God. Our text today is not an example of the "attitude of gratitude" that is so common today. If you're like me, you might be a little tired of the tyranny of gratitude! You must have gratitude! Do you ever notice that when people express their gratitude it is a list of things that we call daily bread and hardly ever express their gratitude for Jesus. It's not that we're just to have gratitude over the daily bread that we receive from God, but that we are to recognize that our daily bread comes from the Giver of daily bread. (LSC)

I'm sure that the nine felt gratitude to God for the gift of healing, which is included in daily bread, but they didn't make the connection that Jesus *IS* the God that gives daily bread.

But there's so much more here than daily bread. Jesus says, "Rise and come, your faith has saved you." (v. 19) The ESV says "rise and go," but the word in Greek can mean "come" or "go." There's a beginning Greek student joke that the Greeks don't know whether they are coming or going! The Samaritan leper most likely went with Jesus and was in the group of disciples along with the Apostles who followed Him. You'll also notice that the ESV says that "your faith has made you well" instead of how I translated it, "your faith has saved you." But the text doesn't use the Greek word for being made well, but uses the Greek word for being saved. The Samaritan leper's realization that Jesus is the Christ, that is, that Jesus is the Messiah who comes to save, and his belief in Him as the Messiah has saved him.

Faith is nothing else than believing that Jesus is God and that He forgives you all your sin so that you have eternal life. The faith of the Samaritan leper in Jesus is the same as your faith in Jesus. Your faith in Jesus is what saves you. Your works don't save you. Your standing in the community doesn't save you. The attitude of gratitude doesn't save you. Only Jesus can save you.

As Paul says, "as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men." (Romans 5:18) Just as the sin of Adam, which you inherited, leads to your death in sin, the sacrifice of Jesus as the propitiation for all sin, leads to your life in Him. This life is found only in Jesus and nowhere else. Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6)

Sin is ugly. It cuts you off from those who you sin against. Worse, it cuts you off from God. The sin of leprosy was interesting in a way because there was no denying that you were cut off from the community and from God. You couldn't be around other people. You couldn't go to the temple where the grace of God was dispensed. You knew you needed help. You knew you needed God. Many live today in a state of sin and think everything is okay. They don't think they have a problem with their fellow man or with God. Look how empty our churches are today in America! Many people are too busy chasing the desires of their flesh or the desires of the world that they rarely give a thought to God.

The grace of God is no longer dispensed in the temple in Jerusalem. It is dispensed by Christ through the means that He has established. In other words, it is dispensed around font, pulpit, and altar. We don't come to the Divine Service primarily to give thanks. We come to the Divine Service to receive the grace of God. We receive the absolution from the pastor as from God Himself. We receive the Word of God proclaimed in Jesus' name from the mouth of the pastor as from the mouth of God Himself. We receive the very body and blood from the hand of the pastor as from the hand of God Himself. Then, of course, we praise God and give thanks for His wonderful mercy. Our praise and thanks are always in response to what He has done for us *personally*. How could we not praise and give thanks after receiving such amazing Grace?

You will face death alone. It may come through a pandemic or it may come through a slow treacherous disease or it may come swiftly through a horrible accident like the fires that are all around us. We pray for a lot of people that are suffering. The reality of death in your flesh works itself out in a myriad of ways. The primary thing that we pray for when someone is suffering their battle with death is that they cling to their faith in Jesus. We want them to get better, but we don't fool ourselves that they won't die from something. We must all face death. If you face death clinging to Jesus, then you are saved. He faced death and defeated the judgment against sin for you. The one who had no sin died so that your sin is paid for. And it is paid in full!

Jesus will come back in glory. He will say to you in the grave the same words He said to the Samaritan leper, "Arise and come, your faith has saved you!" What an amazing and wonderful day that will be!

In Jesus' name. Amen.