

25-Cent Faith

Let me read you this week's gospel passage again:

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

(The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha: Luke 17 11-19)

Can you imagine what it was like to be a leper -- to be infected with a deadly disease and forced to live apart from others -- to be separated from your family -- to have no way of making a living -- to be forced to warn passers by of your presence by shouting, "Unclean!"

I recently saw a couple of movies that gave me a look into the world of social lepers. Last week Carol told you about the movie "Soul Food", and used it as an example of the healing power of communion and a shared table. In the movie, three sisters struggle to get along with each other after the love and guidance of their mother, Big Mama, is gone. They argue and squabble and insult one another for their failings, their problems, and their hurts.

In the movie, the youngest daughter, a talented hairdresser, has just gotten married to a man who is an ex-convict. He loses his job when his employer finds out that he lied about being convicted of a crime on his job application. He doesn't want to tell his new wife that he lost his job, so he keeps quiet while he looks for another job. He encounters rejection after rejection on his job hunt, and is eventually thrown into jail again after getting into a bar fight. He is truly a social leper. Only with help from another of the sisters is he finally able to find work, reclaim his life, and reconcile with his now pregnant wife.

The other movie is "Catch Me If You Can", starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hanks. DiCaprio plays a character named Frank Abagnale. Abagnale, a real person, was once one of the world's most famous con men. He wrote and cashed over two million dollars in fraudulent checks. The most amazing thing about his criminal career, however, was not his success in cashing bad checks, but his success in posing as a commercial airline pilot -- an attorney -- a college professor -- and a physician. Steven Spielberg

has done a great job making his story into a movie.

While I was fascinated by Abagnale's cleverness, it was fascinating to see what happened when he was finally caught. He made the mistake of going to France to retire from crime. A stewardess recognized him, and he soon found himself in a French jail. He learned too late about French jails. They stripped him naked and threw him into a cell with no bed -- no toilet -- no sink -- and no light. The only thing in the cell was a bucket -- and it wasn't emptied very often. He slept naked on the stone floor. He had no visitors -- no phone calls -- no contact with the outside world. I am sure that a leper from Jesus' time could have sympathized with Frank's situation.

When Abignale was released from prison, with help from the FBI agent played by Tom Hanks, things didn't improve much. Except for an occasional minimum-wage job, he couldn't get work. When he finally did find a job, and tried to advance, he got fired when they discovered his criminal record. He had a terrible time.

But then Abagnale realized that his life of crime had given him knowledge to advise banks and other companies about preventing theft, and he began a successful consulting business. Not many former prisoners are able to recover as well. Most are limited to low-paying menial work. They may never again have anything that we would regard as a normal life.

"Unclean! Unclean!" Lepers had to warn passers by lest the passers by accidentally touch the leper and become infected.

As Jesus entered a village on the border of Galilee and Samaria, ten lepers shouted another greeting. "Jesus, Master," they cried, "have mercy on us!" That was a leper's only hope -- mercy. The usual mercy was a small coin -- a bit of money to buy a bit of bread. But these lepers had heard tales of Jesus' miracles. They didn't want a small mercy. They wanted healing. They wanted Jesus to restore their lives.

Luke says, "When Jesus saw them..." That is a small detail that we shouldn't overlook. Jesus saw them.

We tend not to see lepers -- sick people -- homeless people -- dying people. Someone once did a study of hospital traffic patterns and found that, as a patient was dying, doctors and nurses visited less and less frequently. Family members visited less and less frequently too. I can understand that. It is just too painful to look into the face of death, knowing that you can't help.

But Jesus saw these lepers. He didn't ignore them like most people. He didn't toss them a coin and hurry on his way. He saw them.

And he answered their request in a way that seems strange -- unless you know the story of Naaman in the Old Testament.

Naaman was a great general -- the king's right-hand man. But Naaman was also a leper. A servant-girl suggested to Naaman's wife that Elisha, the man of God, could heal her husband, so Naaman went to see Elisha. However, instead of healing Naaman, Elisha told him to bathe in the River Jordan seven times.

Naaman was insulted! If he wanted to bathe in a river, they had plenty of rivers where he came from. He didn't need to make this long trip only to be told to bathe in the River Jordan.

But one of Naaman's servants came to him with this plea. The servant said:

"Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult,
would you not have done it?

How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean' "

So Naaman went down to the Jordan and washed himself seven times. And the Bible says: "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean." Naaman, overjoyed, returned to Elisha to give thanks and to praise God. He said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

In a like manner, Jesus told these ten lepers to step out in faith. He didn't heal them, but instead he told them to present themselves to the priests. Priests were leprosy inspectors. They were responsible for determining that a person had leprosy and should be banished from community -- or that they didn't have leprosy and should be returned to community. By telling the lepers to go to the priests, Jesus was saying, in effect, that they should start their journey, knowing that they had not yet been healed, but having faith that they would be healed before they arrived at the priests' doorstep.

It was a small thing that Jesus told them to do -- to start their journey to the priests -- but it was a great thing too. These men had lived without hope for a long time, but Jesus gave them hope. Now, instead of healing them, Jesus told them to leave him -- to go away as if they had been healed -- to step out in faith that they would be healed. They did what Jesus told them to do, and it happened! Luke says, "And as they went, they were made clean."

This passage from Luke reminds me of one of those signs that churches have out front with witty sayings on them. This particular sign said: **"Looking for a sign from God? This is it."**

Only the Samaritan saw the sign, and came back and thanked Jesus and praised the Lord. Where Jesus tells the Samaritan that "your faith has made you well" the Bible uses a word that has the meaning of "saved" or "made whole", as well as the meaning "made well". So in effect, Jesus is telling the Samaritan that his faith has saved him. Nine lepers were healed, but one was saved.

Jesus calls us to that same kind of faith. He calls us every day to do little things in faith -- expecting that God will do right by us -- little things like helping someone who needs help -- like loving our neighbor -- like taking our kids to church on Sunday -- like giving. It might have been easier for the lepers if Jesus had given them a difficult assignment -- something equal to the great blessing that they were asking. They might have found it easier to believe Jesus if he had told them to crawl on their hands and knees to the temple in Jerusalem.

But instead Jesus said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." Jesus hadn't healed them, but he asked them to take a small step of faith -- to show their belief that he would heal them. They took that step, and "as they went, they were made clean."

It might be easier for us if Jesus made it harder for us -- if he gave us a tremendous challenge. Instead, Jesus calls us to step out in faith in a thousand little ways. That is not easy. If it is difficult to do something great for Jesus, it is even more difficult to do ordinary things for Jesus day after day.

The great preacher, Fred Craddock, put it this way. He said:

To give my life for Christ appears glorious.
To pour myself out for others
-- to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom
-- I'll do it.
I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory.

We think that giving our all to the Lord
is like taking a thousand dollar bill

and laying it on the table.
"Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all."

But the reality for most of us
is that he sends us to the bank
and has us cash in the thousand dollars for quarters.
We go through life putting out twenty-five cents here and fifty cents there.
Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, "Get lost."
Go to a committee meeting.
Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home.

Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious.
It's done in all those little acts of love,
twenty-five cents at a time.

It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory;
it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.

Look for little ways to be faithful to Jesus this week. Show kindness to someone that you would usually ignore or avoid. Set aside a few minutes to read the Bible and to pray. Examine your life to see if there is something that you should change -- and ask God to help you. Re-examine your church giving and volunteering to see if you are doing what you should. Invite someone to church next week.

By the way, if you need something to remind you, think of another one of those witty church signs that said: **"Don't wait for the hearse to bring you to church."**

If you will make a habit of doing little things for Christ, he will use those little things to change your life. He will use them to re-shape your heart and your thinking. He will make it possible for you to love the unlovely. And he will bless your life. But that will happen only when you step out in faith -- when you begin to obey Jesus in the little things.

Amen.

Offertory Prayer:

Nurturing God, you bless us each day. You show mercy upon us. You offer us your unconditional love. Indeed, we know that you are all around us and in us, as abundant as the air that we breathe. Yet we take your presence for granted so often. So now we pause to turn back to you and to praise you with this collective act of offering our tithes. Accept these generous gifts of money. As we get up and go on our way this week, help us to be observant of your healing presence. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Benediction:

Oh, God of Love, who has taught us that in doing the small, everyday things we show your love and do your will, help us on our way this coming week. Lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.