

In 1968, a young Episcopalian priest, Martin Bell, published a book of parables, poems and stories called *The Way of the Wolf: The Gospel in New Images*<sup>1</sup>. And for a few decades it was one of those books that was a “must buy” for pastors, youth leaders and camp counselors. It’s a good book and one of the pieces that Bell wrote is titled “Where Are the Nine?” And every time I hear today’s gospel, I can’t help but think of it. So I’m going to share a bit of it with you today. *Where are the nine?*

+ + +

It's simple, really.

One of them was frightened - that's all. He didn't understand what had happened, and it frightened him. So he looked for some place to hide. Jesus scared him.

[The] second was offended because he had not been required to do something difficult before he could be healed. It was all too easy. He had expected months, maybe years, of fasting and prayer and washing and righteous living to be the requirement.

But he had done none of this. He hadn't earned his reward.

His motto was "you get what you pay for." And so, Jesus offended him.

The third had realized too late that she had not really wanted to be cleansed. That she [didn't] did not know what to do or how to live or even who she was without her leprosy. Although it had been her fervent plea to be healed, she now began to see how much she had needed her leprosy and consequently how necessary it had been in defining her as a person. Jesus had taken away her identity.

[It's hard] to explain the reason the fourth leper did not return to give thanks. Perhaps because it is such a simple reason - and perhaps because we very nearly tread on holy ground even to talk about it. In a word, the fourth leper did not return because in his delirium of joy, he forgot. He forgot. That's all. He was so happy that he forgot.

The fifth leper was unable to say thank you – any more.

There is something that happens to a [person] who must beg and who is shunned by [neighbors and friends], and who is grudgingly thrown a few coins and who is always - in the midst of such an existence ... expected to say thank you. [The fifth leper just couldn't say thank you, anymore, to anybody.

Not even to Jesus.

The sixth leper was... a mother who had been separated from her family for eleven years because of her leprosy. She was now free to rejoin her husband and children. She didn't return to give thanks because she was hurrying home. Like a wild animal released from captivity, she had been freed by Jesus. [And so she simply ran home. Straight home.]

1

The seventh... didn't believe that Jesus had anything to do with the cleansing. He knew that healing had taken place, but why and how were the questions. Certainly he did not believe in hocus pocus, magic, miracles - any of that. There was a perfectly [logical] explanation for what had happened, but it didn't have anything to do with Jesus. He didn't return to give thanks because Jesus had had nothing to do with what had happened.

The eighth leper did not return precisely because she did believe that Jesus had

---

<sup>1</sup> Bell, Martin, *The Way of the Wolf: The Gospel in New Images*, Seabury Press, 1968

healed her - that the Kingdom of God was here and the Messiah had arrived. To return to give thanks when the Kingdom of God was so close at hand – [no way!] And so she ran to [share the good news.]

What shall [we] say about the ninth leper? What was his experience?

Bell leaves that ninth leper as a mystery. Healed and happy but keeping his reasons to himself.

+ + +

Ten were healed but only one came back to thank Jesus. So is the point of the story that gratitude is rare?

It's easy to condemn those other nine for not coming back to give thanks. It is so much easier than trying to figure out why they didn't return. How often do we assume that people are behaving badly rather than imagining that there is a perfectly reasonable reason for their actions?

Bell ends his story by saying, "yes, it is good to give thanks. And yes, it is understandable that thanks doesn't always happen." And thanks be to God, when we are less than gracious, the good Lord doesn't act the way that we would. Getting angry. Or having our feelings hurt. Or finding a way to punish the ungrateful, but there's got to be more to this story than just being thankful and actually returning to say thanks to God. What did the other nine miss?

I think it comes down to two pairs of words. And the first two are HEALED and SAVED.

When the ten left Jesus, they were instructed to go to the priest in order to be healed. When you had a disease like leprosy, you had to be checked out by the priest. You had to be certified as being clean and well, so that you could return to live in your community. And so they did what they were told, and the healing was accomplished. They believed that Jesus could heal them of their leprosy, and he did. But the tenth guy came back and something more happened to him. Jesus said to the Samaritan, "Your faith has made you well." But you can also translate it as "your faith has healed and saved you." The Greek work, *sesoken*, can be translated in any of these ways: healed, made well, or saved. It can also be translated, the way it is in the King James Version, "Your faith has made you whole," but however we translate it, one thing is clear: there is more at stake here than just healing from leprosy. The Samaritan left Jesus that day having not just been healed; he was saved. His life was renewed in ways that had as much to do with his heart and his soul and his mind as with his body. So that's the first thing the other nine missed.

The second pair of words is a gift from Martin Luther, who was once asked to describe the nature of true worship. What does it mean to worship? His answer was: *the tenth leper turning back*.

He didn't just thank the good rabbi for the miracle of healing. He came back to give thanks and praise. He prostrated himself- laid face down in the dirt in front of Jesus in a posture of worship - and praised God for what had happened to him. The Samaritan paid attention in a way that the other nine did not. He recognized Jesus for who he truly is and so he didn't just give thanks, he worshipped him. That's the other two pair of words – THANKS and WORSHIP.

In returning to give thanks and praise – the tenth fellow entered into a relationship, not just with Jesus the teacher, the miracle worker. He had a relationship with the Messiah, the Savior, the Christ.

New Testament scholar Fred Craddock points out that it isn't Jesus own people – the Jews, who come back recognizing Jesus for who he truly is - it's the foreigner. The stranger. He's a complete outsider. And yet it is the Samaritan who sees that God has been at work in his life.

Craddock writes, "It is often the stranger in the church who sings heartily the hymns

we have long left to the choir, who expresses gratitude for blessings we had not noticed, who listens attentively to the sermon we think we have already heard, who gets excited about our old Bible, and who becomes actively involved in acts of service to which we send small donations. Must it always be so," he asks<sup>2</sup>

+ + +

This morning in church we will gather together and we will baptize two children-Hailey Myers and Colton Beer. And they're little yet. Too little to remember what will happen to them today. Too little to remember what it means to be baptized, but they will come to the story of Jesus and they will hear it with fresh ears and see it with fresh eyes. But will we? Will we help them to see what the other nine missed? That it's not just about feeling grateful – it's about showing our gratitude in concrete ways. And when it comes to being grateful to God, we should do more than say thank you, we should be praising God with our whole heart and soul and mind?

These are not just gifts we have laid at the altar. They are words of praise, surrounded in bags and boxes and cans.

The two children being baptized this morning, Hailey and Colton, don't have sponsors, so the congregation will be their sponsors. And the congregation will promise to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those two children.

May we have fresh eyes and fresh ears. May we hear those words that seem so familiar in new ways as we teach them to our children and our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren. Even if they are not our children, they are our children. And we are called to share the good news of worship and praise with them.

---

<sup>2</sup> Craddock, Fred B., *Luke: Interpretation series*, John Knox Press, Louisville:1990, p.202-203