

“The Untouchables”

Luke 17:11-19

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Robert Stack played the lead character in the television series and Kevin Costner was tapped for this role in the 1987 Oscar winning movie titled, “The Untouchables.” The television show and movie were about government agents assigned to enforce Prohibition, fight crime and clean out corruption in the Chicago police and fire departments in the 1930’s. Eliot Ness was the Chief Investigator and leader of this legendary band of ten law enforcement officers. In addition to television shows and movies, Ness has been the subject of numerous songs, video games and books. Because Al Capone and other gangster leaders could not bribe Ness and his team of agents, they were known as the Untouchables.

Our text today refers to another group of ten men known as untouchables, though for another reason. They had leprosy, one of the most dreaded diseases in biblical times.

Leprosy was an incurable disease that was highly contagious, so once diagnosed, a person had to leave family and friends and live in isolation on the outskirts of town. If a person with leprosy noticed anyone getting close, he was required to warn that person to keep his distance by crying out, “Unclean! Unclean!”

As Jesus made his way to Jerusalem and passed near Samaria, he encountered ten lepers that kept their distance. Instead of warning him of danger because of their contagious disease however, they cried out for help. “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

When Jesus saw them, he told them to go show themselves to the priest so they could get a certificate of healing and be reunited with their families and reintegrated into society. Luke tells us that they were healed as they followed Jesus’ instructions.

It is at this point in the story that something unusual happened. One returned to Jesus when he saw that he had been healed. He went back so that he could thank Jesus for his kindness and praise God for his healing. It just so happened that this man was a Samaritan, not a Jew as the other nine were.

Jesus appeared to have been surprised that only one returned. “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

The unanswered questions gave way to Jesus’ affirmation of the Samaritan’s profound yet humble faith. “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

Is this a story about faith and healing? Gratitude or ingratitude? Acceptance or rejection? Yes. It is about all of these issues and others because most stories have multiple levels of meaning. This one certainly does. However, there seems to be one issue that connects all the others. Let’s look at it this morning.

According to Dr. Alan Culpepper, the act of seeing plays a vital role in this story. Jesus saw the men with leprosy and responded to their need. One leper, a Samaritan, saw the gift of grace that he had received and returned to thank Jesus. He also saw the connection between Jesus and God and praised God that he had been healed. Finally, Jesus saw this man’s remarkable faith, grounded in humility and gratitude, and gave him something the other nine did not receive, the gift of salvation.

Rabbi Harold Kushner says that religion is a way of seeing. This seems to be reinforced in this story. Had Jesus ignored these lepers like the priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan ignored the man in the ditch, none would have been healed. Had the healed Samaritan not recognized that his healing was a gift, he would not have returned to Jesus and expressed his gratitude. Their faith opened their eyes and enabled them to respond differently than others to what was going on around them and to them.

Don't we need this kind of faith? Don't we need a faith that makes us more compassionate and grateful? Wouldn't the world be better if we were? I think so.

Who are the lepers in our society that feel unworthy of associating with respectable folk? How many people do we encounter daily that feel abandoned and lonely? Who among us has no soft place to fall after making mistakes? Who has no one to soothe their wounds and ease their pain? Who is suffering in silence and given up hope that anyone will care?

If our faith does not sharpen our vision, help us to notice these people and cause us to respond to their plight, what will? Of what value is a blind and powerless faith?

Religion is a way of seeing. Hopefully, it enables us to look at the world through Jesus' eyes, see what others overlook or ignore and respond with compassion and grace.

Religion is also a way of responding to acts of compassion with the deepest level of gratitude. When the Samaritan returned to Jesus to thank him for his healing, Luke wrote that he fell at Jesus' feet. This was the normal posture of someone desperately begging for help and pleading for mercy. Evidently the Samaritan's gratitude was as strong as his need to be healed, and I don't doubt that it was. Because it was and he went out of his way to find Jesus, he received a blessing that the other nine missed.

Culpepper sees gratitude as the purest measure of a person's character and spiritual condition. It is his opinion that gratitude reveals a humility of spirit and sensitivity to love expressed by life itself, good health, friendship of others and the love of family. A grateful person does not overlook or take for granted gifts that need to be valued, treasured and appreciated.

With this in mind, who and what are on your Thanksgiving list this year? What gifts have you received from the hands and hearts of compassionate family members, friends and God? How do you need to express your gratitude? What difference will it make if you do?

Who will be surprised if you fail to notice the gifts you have received and respond with the deepest level of appreciation? What will you miss if you fail to respond with humble gratitude? Ponder these questions as you prepare for Thanksgiving and let your faith help you answer them.