

Thank you

We begin this morning with the older testament story of Five Star General Naaman.

Like most of us, he's got a problem and he's looking for God to act with all the subtlety of a brass band.

He wants abracadabra and maybe a nice light show to go along with his cure, and when that's not happening, he walks off in a huff!

Which is exactly the way most folks think about God.

We so often think of God as the old bearded man sitting on a cloud, looking down on us like a kid looking down on his ant farm.

Naturally that kind of God only acts in noisy ways – which is maybe why we call earthquakes and floods "Acts of God!"

But the genius of our faith is that God is not like that at all; as General Naaman eventually discovers.

As 1 of the 10 cleaned up from his skin disease in the gospel lesson discovers.

God isn't out there, God is here, with us.

Always was, always will be.

Naaman is a big shot, so it must kill him to humble himself to pack up and travel to the defeated backwater nowheresville of Israel, to ask the help of a nobody named Elisha, on the advice of a slave girl.

But, desperate times call for desperate measures.

Like Naaman, the 10 outcasts in the gospel are also a desperate bunch.

Tossed out of their community because of skin disease, they are forbidden to return home.

They see Jesus passing by, and holler out for help.

They have leprosy, a word that pretty much covers any kind of skin disease, making them unclean, kicked out of town, where they will stay until their condition changes.

And happily today, they get the change!

Just like Elisha with Naaman, there's no light show, no hocus-pocus with the cure Jesus gives.

Just "go show the priests," and as they meander along, lo and behold, the psoriasis, the acne, the shingles, are gone!

Yet unlike Naaman, who at last comes to see the gentle finger of God in his cure, 9 of the 10 don't even connect their encounter with Jesus with this new found good fortune.

Unlike Naaman, whose eyes are opened to the earth shattering realization that the true God is the God of Israel, the 9 are back to life as usual: back to the country club, back to work, back to the corner bar.

They encounter Jesus, and sure, something good happens, but nothing really changes.

In a way, that's a pretty good description of how too many folks experience Christianity.

We get baptized, show up now and then for church, but life rolls on as usual.

This is what we call "religion."

It's all wrapped up with rules and regulations, topped off with a superstitious belief in a disinterested God who only shows up occasionally to make a big noise.

But then there is the 10th fellow.

A Samaritan.

The equivalent today of a Republican (if you're a Democrat) or a Democrat (if you're a Republican).

He says thank you.

And something happens to him.

He finds himself, strangely and unexpectedly, transformed, and instead of religion, he catches sight of a kingdom.

Elsewhere in Luke's gospel, Jesus says:

"And I assign to you, just as my Father assigns to me, a kingdom....."

Somewhere along the line, we lost what it is that Jesus comes to give us.

We forgot we are the inheritors of a kingdom, not after death, but now!

And we have too often traded in that spectacularly good news for mere religion, for pie in the sky in the sweet by and by, and we have to wonder, why?

Have you ever spent time looking back over your life?

Have you sat with the mistakes and foibles and seemingly wrong turns in your life?

For many folks, thinking about the mistakes, the lousy judgments, the bad acts, are the last thing to spend any time on.

After all, isn't this is the stuff we want to forget?

And in a way, that's what's going on with the 9 who continue on their way.

For them, leprosy is now part of their past, it doesn't affect them anymore, so they can just get back to the routines of life.

But when we encounter Jesus, we encounter a savior who says that if we want to live, we need to die first.

And that death begins with a deep and thorough look at who we are, and who we have been; the good, the bad and the ugly.

It's a necessary undertaking because Jesus wants all of us.

Not only our fine pious good-deed-doing selves, but he wants the snake that lives in you and me too.

He wants that in me which is a cheater, a liar, an adulterer, a con.

Because he can only save all of us if we are willing to give all that we are, even my rottenness, even my smallness.

When that one fellow returns to say thank you, he returns in his leprosy.

Even though it's gone, it remains a part of who he is.

And Jesus welcomes him; this mixed bag of the good, the bad and ugly that defines every human being. Capon, K,J,G.

That's why the kingdom of God isn't like a far off Disneyland that admits only the squeaky clean.

As Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas, "the kingdom of God is spread out over the earth, but people can't see it."

It's a kingdom we can see only in our lostness — only in our brokenness.

Because the kingdom is a community and every "real community requires the confession of brokenness, because every human being is broken — vulnerable.

Yet, we try so hard to hide our wounds, even though we are all wounded.

But if we hope to live in a real community, we really do need to expose our wounds and weaknesses to one another.

Because when we do, love pours out, turning confession into joy." M. Scott Peck, MD (paraphrased).

All of which, it seems to me, is summed up in this story, about a fellow who just moved to a new church, along with several others.

The minister invites the newcomers over for dinner.

Soon, the conversation turns to why they have joined.

One is a musician, who likes the church's music.

Another loves the great youth program.

Another just likes the minister.

Then Sam speaks up.

Sam was addicted to meth, and stumbled into the church, begging for help.

The director for church outreach said:

"We've spent our budget for the month.

I can't get you into treatment until next month.

But if you'll stay with us, we'll stay with you."

She took Sam's hand, they kneeled down together, and prayed.

He stayed and got into a treatment program.

"I've been sober for 3 years now," Sam says, "and the reason I joined this church — is that God saved me in this church!"

The other folks look sheepishly around the table.

"We're here for the music and the parking; he's here for salvation."

A few weeks later, Sam is in jail, and one of the church folk goes to visit him there.

"I was working in the outreach center," Sam explains, "counseling people like myself; telling them that they can do right.

But then I realize, I'm not doing right myself.

I had an old warrant out for my arrest — probably never would have caught up with me, but I knew about it.

So, on Christmas Eve, I turned myself in."

Sam goes on: "I'll be out by Easter!

I can't wait to worship at the church on Easter!

But in the meantime, I'm running an outreach center right here in the jail.

A lot of people can't read or write, so I write letters to their sweethearts, telling them that they miss them and love them."

"Every night, we pray.

Just a few show up.

We pray for the other prisoners, and for the guards." Brosend, *The Preaching of Jesus*, 120-1 (paraphrased).

Ten are healed.

One says "thank you" ..... and is forever changed.

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