

A PUBLIC DISPLAY OF AFFECTION

A sermon preached the 9th of October 2016, The 21st Sunday after Pentecost, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Luke 17: 11 – 19.

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

— Luke 17: 11 – 16

*If you don't know me by now
You will never never never know me
All the things that we've been through
You should understand me like I understand you*

I woke up this morning with *Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes*. The story of the ten lepers put their biggest hit in my head. If you don't know who they are, youtube them. Harold got top billing because he founded the group, but their lead singer was Teddy Pendergrass. I'll come back to them later.

"We read to know we are not alone," CS Lewis said. We read stories vicariously. We grant the writer her *donné*, her givens. If the story is Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, we see ourselves in Elinor Dashwood or Fitzwilliam Darcy. If the story's Luke's ten lepers, we wonder what it's like to be one.

I told you about a friend of mine, Sandy Muir, who, after he'd graduated college in 1954, contracted polio. When Sandy was diagnosed, the neighbors suddenly left on vacation. Nobody knew then, we still don't really know, how polio is spread, but they knew it was contagious. They knew that about leprosy in the ancient world. The standard public health measure was to quarantine. Leprosy was alienating, dangerous, and terribly disfiguring.

No one can explain why one person, and not another, gets a dread disease, but it's not because they deserve it. "God does not willingly grieve or afflict the children of men," as the *Book of Common Prayer* says.

The lepers come to Jesus asking for mercy. He tells them to go show themselves to the priests so that their healing can be validated. Priests were the best of the

health guardians. They would examine according to Levitical requirements and they would be able to put the stamp of approval on the sick so they could reenter society.

Go show yourselves to the priests, Jesus says, and they move in that direction. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them who bring good news." How beautiful, too, are the feet of them who hear and obey it.

Their toes are gone but their ruined feet decide to do what he says. They've got faith with shoes on; faith willing to take the next steps. What do they have to show to the priests? Clawlike hands. A fetid smell. But Jesus tells them to go. And they go.

"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back and praised God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan." He isn't a Jew. He's an outsider. Luke, a Gentile, has a heart for this.

What makes this one leper turn back? Is it that he's grateful? Do you think the other nine weren't? I can't imagine. I think he was probably just better trained by his mother than the others were!

He had to say thank you. That's all. As a Samaritan, he would have had to go to Gerazim, the counter-temple, to show himself to a priest. The priest he shows himself to is the one who heals him. He asked for mercy. Receiving it, he moves closer to Jesus, prostrating himself at his feet.

Leprosy was a sign of being rejected by God, of being under God's curse. Miriam complains about Moses and suddenly she's stricken with leprosy. That showed whose side God was on at that point, and it was not Miriam's. Or

Uzziah. He intrudes on the priestly office and is stricken with leprosy as a way of showing the world that God was offended at this king who was pretending to be a priest. Leprosy was a sign of God's curse. The removal of it was a sign of God's blessing.

The leper reminds me of the sinful woman forgiven much. She falls at Jesus' feet the way this leper does. Self-abandonment. Forgetfulness. The lowering oneself at Jesus' feet is the highest expression of praise. It is what we come to this altar, beneath this *Christus Rex*, to do: to fall at Jesus' feet *and not give a rip what anybody thinks of us for it*. Praise is irrepressible. This leper, the sinful woman, show themselves to Jesus. So do we.

As I left the rectory the other day for a clergy retreat at the Bishop's Ranch, I felt sorry for myself. I'd have to be apart from the woman I get through the nights with and enter every new day beside. In the driveway, my wife said, "You must kiss me." She was right. I had to kiss her, but it wasn't *that* kind of must! Our worship is like that. The Mass is a public display of affection.

The Apostle Paul writes to Gentiles in Ephesus [2]:
[You] were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air . . . Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ

Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

It's not all peaches and cream, trusting Jesus. Those of us old enough to know *Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes* know it. We don't get the miracles we ask for. Many of our devout wishes are never granted. But in receiving the Blessed Sacrament, we are handed a miracle beyond our wildest imagining. We are brought near.

So we come to this altar, week after week, showing ourselves to Jesus, praising him sometimes through clenched teeth, sometimes fledging alleluias sweet and clear as birdsong. Because if God doesn't know us when we're perplexed, or sad, or beside ourselves with gladness, then God doesn't really know us at all.

*All the things that we've been through
You should understand me like I understand you
Now baby I know the difference
between right and wrong
I ain't gonna do nothing to upset our happy home
Oh don't get so excited
when I come home a little late at night
Cause we only act like children
when we argue fuss and fight
If you don't know me by now
You will never never never know me*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission
please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501,
or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org.*