

One Tenth

Luke 17:11-19

September 15, 2019

First Presbyterian, Luling

Ten percent. It doesn't seem like it's very much when it is a sale. Ten percent off is not enough to lure me to a store, nor enough to entice me to buy something I normally wouldn't buy. It has the kindness to be easy enough to figure mathematically, but ten percent is really not a big discount, at least in the price range of things I normally purchase. I guess if there was a ten percent off sale at a car dealership, I might be more appreciative of a ten percent off sale.

Now, it's a whole different story if you're going to charge me ten percent extra. I was at a store the other day, and the person at the cash register was new, and she pushed some incorrect key somehow, and all the sudden I was being charged ten percent tax rather than 8.25 percent tax. And you can bet I noticed. I have a friend who had to have a finger amputated. That's one tenth of her fingers, and she definitely misses that ten percent. If you wanted ten percent of my piece of chocolate cake, I would not be pleased. If you asked me for ten percent of my paycheck, that is significant enough that I would want to know why.

All these various examples is to say that, depending on the context, ten percent of something can be negligible and piddly or significant and meaningful. In this case, in today's Gospel reading, one tenth, ten percent, is both piddly and significant at the same time.

It's probably a familiar story to you. Ten lepers, all outcasts out of necessity for the common good, and outcasts by law, beg Jesus for mercy, for healing. Jesus doesn't touch them but heals from a distance. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priest, as the law required, so that they might be restored to a whole life in the community. All ten of them head off toward the Temple to obey what Jesus had told them to do.

But one of them, one tenth, ten percent of the healed lepers was different. He came back to thank Jesus and praise God. Ten percent of the lepers who were thankful enough to say so seems sort of piddly. Even Jesus seems a little disappointed at this small percentage. What happened to the other nine, he wonders. Ninety percent of healed lepers did not give thanks. That seems like a lot, and ten percent thankfulness seems like not much at all.

But the one tenth of the leper crowd who does return to give thanks. He seems to count for a lot. His thankfulness is deep and meaningful and significant, not just to him but to Jesus and to all who hear his story. He is not ten percent thankful; he is one hundred percent thankful. The sincerity of his thankfulness doesn't depend on the

actions or lack thereof of the other nine.

A pause to say that it's important to notice that we don't really hear the end of the story of the other nine-tenths. Jesus does not condemn them. They do exactly what Jesus says to do. And they are healed. Their healing doesn't get taken away just because they didn't return to give thanks to the healer. The ninety percent go on their way, not oblivious to their physical and community healing, but oblivious to the additional depth—spiritual depth—their healing could have had.

What makes that one tenth leper different? Luke rattles off a list of verbs of what the one-tenth leper did. He saw. He returned. He praised. He worshipped. He gave thanks. And then he got up, and he went. Let's take those one by one.

He saw that he was healed. Now, I'm sure that the nine-tenths lepers saw that they were healed, too, and I'm sure that they realized what it meant for their life in the community. Not only was their physical health restored, but they could participate in the life of the community again, for they would no longer be a contagious danger to others, nor would they be considered ritually unclean. So what does Luke mean, that this one-tenth leper *saw* that he was healed?

Luke hasn't told us yet, but this one-tenth leper is a Samaritan. As we saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan, they were enemies of Jews. They worshiped in similar ways, but just different enough to be threatening. They had a different history. Sometimes the uneasiness between the two groups turned into hatred and violence. And I think this is key to how this one-tenth leper *saw* that he was healed. He was more surprised than the rest of them, not expecting this Jewish teacher to notice him or judge him worthy of being healed. He saw that, despite what he might have expected, this Jewish teacher had healed him—even him—despite the bad history between their people. It's more than the physical healing the nine-tenths lepers had experienced. It's even more than the community healing the nine-tenths lepers had experienced. It's possibly the beginning of a healing of old wounds between two groups of people. And this one-tenth leper sees all of that when he looks down at his own skin.

After he sees, the one-tenth leper turns back, returns, comes back, goes out of his way, delays his own restoration, to come back to thank Jesus. Returning is important in Luke's gospel, at the beginning and at the end. At Jesus' birth, after the shepherds go to the manger and see the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, just as the angels had told them, Luke says they “returned” (Luke 2:20). And then at the end of the Gospel, similarly, after the disciples see the empty tomb, they “return” to Jerusalem and worship with great joy. (Luke 24:52). It's hard for me to want to return back inside my house from the garage to pick up the thing I've forgotten—usually my water bottle. But the one-tenth leper returns at much more cost to himself, just to give thanks.

Similarly, the next verb is that the one-tenth leper “praised God with a loud voice.” In the two passages I just mentioned—at the birth of Jesus and at the

resurrection of Jesus, it's the same combination of words: returning and praising. The shepherds return and praise God, and so do the disciples. And so does this leper. Returning for his own reasons is an incomplete return. He returns to praise God.

Which goes along with the next verb, which our version this morning translated "prostrated himself." Which is accurate, but not something that we really relate to. It is probably a similar posture to what you may have seen Muslim worshipers at prayer. A repeated kneeling and bowing, a respectful position, a worshipful posture. The point is that the one-tenth leper returned to praise and worship God. Now, according to the Jews, the appropriate place to praise and worship God was the Temple. And according to the Samaritans, the appropriate place to praise and worship God was at another sanctuary at a place in their territory called Mount Gerizim. This one-tenth leper is showing us something else: that the appropriate place to worship God is in the presence of Jesus. This will be a major shift for the people who would become known as Christians, that God can be worshiped in the person of Jesus Christ. And this outsider Samaritan leper is one of the first people to do so.

The last thing the one-tenth leper does is give thanks. Funny, that's the one thing people tend to remember, as if this story is a manners lesson. But the giving thanks doesn't come without all these other actions, too. It's tied together with the returning and praising and worshiping. The word for thanks is the same word that Luke uses at the Last Supper, when Jesus gave thanks to God before he broke the bread. Giving thanks seems like a basic action, but the other nine lepers don't do it, and it's intertwined with the worshiping and praising that the one-tenth leper does.

The last two verbs aren't actions the one-tenth leper takes, but they are actions that Jesus commands him to do: get up and go. Get up and go on your way, to your new and restored and faithful life. Jesus commends the Samaritan's faith, which would have been astounding to his audience, so convinced were they that they were right and the Samaritans were wrong. But Jesus says his faith has saved him, and to get up and go. That's the only instructions that Jesus gives him. He doesn't tell the one-tenth leper to share his story or to go chase down the other nine or anything in particular, except get up and go. I guess the one-tenth leper has shown good instincts thus far, and Jesus thinks he will do the right thing without further instruction.

The verbs that fill the one-tenth leper's story offer a pattern for us, as well. Every week, every day, maybe even more often than that, Jesus heals us. Jesus gives us forgiveness and reconciliation, and releases us from things that hold us captive. Jesus's patience with us is infinite. Our response needs to mirror the one-tenth leper's response. We need to see. We need to see Jesus's healing hand in our lives. That may be the hardest step. We need to notice and realize what Jesus has done for us. And then we return and praise and worship and give thanks. We come each week to do those very things. Those things fill the Gospels, and they fill our lives too. And then,

having been healed, and having worshiped, we get sent on our way. Get up and go, Jesus says. Get up and go. Can we be as faithful as the one-tenth leper, the one no one would have chosen as a model of faith?

Sure, we'll need to get forgiven and reconciled and healed again. And again we will return and praise and worship and give thanks. And be sent out again. And it repeats, over and over. Jesus never runs out of healing nor forgiveness nor patience with us, though surely we test that from time to time. That's the rhythm of worship: being healed, giving thanks, heading out again.