

Who the Leper Sees

Do you ever think back on your high school days? As I was getting ready to prepare this morning's message, I started thinking about mine. During that time of remembering, I went to the bookshelf and pulled out an old high school yearbook. And flipped through its pages. There—with all the other sophomore class pictures—was the photo of Chip.

Now Chip wasn't someone I knew very well. Probably most of our fellow students didn't know him very well, either. Because in those days, it was all about physical appearance. It was all about what we saw on the outside. And after we saw Chip on the outside, we never took the time to get to know him. For at that age—to our shame—we were singularly lacking in empathy and in compassion. The thing about Chip was, he had a severe case of acne.

Did he have any friends? Did he ever have a date? Was he shunned? Ostracized? Excluded from all the in-crowd cliques that operated in our school? Eventually, of course, that teen-age boy named Chip would grow into a man. And the acne would clear up.

But if I passed him on the street today, would he be bearing scars that I could see?

Would he also be carrying other scars? Scars that we, his classmates, had a part in inflicting? Scars that *can't* be seen?

In this Sunday's gospel text, the focus is on the ability to see and on the act of seeing. Of recognizing. Of perceiving. Of discerning. Of understanding. That's what I'd like us to reflect on during this time together.

As Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, travels along the border between Galilee and Samaria, he sees a group of people—ten people, Luke says—who have leprosy. Now let's pause for a moment and consider what that means. In the Bible, the words that get translated *leper* and *leprosy* actually refer to persons who suffer from a number of different skin conditions and diseases, and to those various diseases themselves.

Most of which are still prevalent in this twenty-first century. If you stop by a CVS or a Rite Aid or a Walgreens this week, you might find an entire aisle of skin-care products and treatments. Now that hasn't always been the case, even when many of us were in high school; much less in biblical times. In Jesus' day, there were no pharmaceutical medications and no dermatologists. The

Law of Moses accorded priests the authority to examine persons with a skin condition and to determine whether or not that condition was contagious.

If found to be contagious, the person would be banned from social contact. Separated from friends and neighbors. Separated even from family. And cast out from the fellowship of faith. The Law required persons with leprosy to live outside the village in a colony of others with a similar disease. And if anyone approached, to cry out a loud warning: “Unclean, unclean.” They had to keep their distance. As individuals and as a group, they were ostracized.

In today’s reading, it’s just such a group that Jesus sees. We figure that most of these ten afflicted persons must be Jews. Because Jesus tells them to do what the Law of their people demands: *to go and show [themselves] to the priests*. And as they go, they are made wondrously clean! Each of them.

But one of them—just one—stops. Changes direction. Turns around. Luke reports that this particular leper is a foreigner. A despised Samaritan. What makes him come back? What does he see in this One he’s encountered? How have his eyes been opened? Do you think that maybe, through this gospel account, your eyes and mine could be opened in the same ways?

Can we see who *he* sees? I think we can! I think that when we look at Jesus Christ through eyes of faith, we *can* see who the Samaritan leper sees.

My brothers and sisters, the Samaritan leper sees and we see the One who sees *us*. Who *really* sees us. Sees not only what's on the outside. But what's on the inside, too. Sees the guilt and the humiliation and the pain and the bottled-up tears. Sees the scars. Sees all the baggage we've been carrying around for so long and don't know how to let go of.

The Samaritan leper sees and we see the One whose nature it is to have mercy. The One who *shows* mercy. We see that this One is merciful. The moment I confess that there's been something unclean in the way I live—the moment I plead *Lord, have mercy on me*—in that very moment sin gets taken away. Wiped away, like a smudge on my skin might be. In that moment I'm made clean. Restored to community. Restored to relationship. Like the man in this narrative, who has been healed.

The Samaritan leper sees and we see the One who heals. See that each of us is in the process of being healed in our deepest, most broken, most hurting places. See that ultimate healing comes from—and *only* from—this Healer of Galilee. Healing comes from

this Great Physician who makes us whole. No matter who we are or where we are.

The Samaritan leper sees and we see the One who crosses borders. The One who chooses to go where others refuse to go. Places like the no-man's land between Galilee and Samaria. Places like cancer wards. Places like psychiatric hospitals. Places where the homeless huddle in darkness. Places like crack houses. Places like prisons. These places are where we see him. Where we see this One who breaks down barriers; this One who cares for the outcast, the outsider, and the ostracized, the foreigner and the forgotten. And after we see him, *really* see him, he calls us to follow him across every boundary—even and maybe especially across those boundaries that we ourselves have established. After we see him, he calls you and me to continue his work of healing.

The Samaritan leper sees and we see the One who does the work of God. The Samaritan leper sees and we see the One whose heart holds all the compassion and all the grace of God—the measureless grace that flows over you and me before we even know we need it. The Samaritan leper sees and we see the One in whom *all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell*. The Samaritan

leper sees and we see, in Christ Jesus, the One true God. And with the psalmist, we sing, *Come! Come and see what God has done!*

The Samaritan leper sees and we see the One who has blessed us abundantly. The One who blesses us still. And we understand every blessing not as our own accomplishment or achievement, but as pure *gift*, from the hand of a loving God.

And so the Samaritan leper sees and we see the One at whose feet we fall. The One to whom we pour out all the thankful praise that can't be contained, the gratitude that wells up from deep within, gratitude to this God who *is*. Gratitude to this God who *acts*. Gratitude to this God who *gives*.

The Samaritan leper sees and we see the One who gives the gift of faith. A faith that grows. A faith that saves. As the curtain falls on today's gospel scene, Jesus says to this man: *Your faith has healed and saved you.*

Your faith has saved you. Christ has promised! The man who hears these words receives so much more than he asks for. The Samaritan leper receives so much more than he could possibly have imagined.

And so, beloved, do you and I. But this One we see bears scars. Scars we had a part in inflicting when this very God came to be our Savior. For this God is the One who saves.

Thanks be to God!

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