

In today's Gospel story, Jesus encounters a small community of ten men, bound together by their experience of leprosy. Their disease, which under Jewish law made them unclean, relegated them to the margins: to the margins of society in terms of interaction with other people; but also literally to the outskirts of town, away from the homes and marketplaces where people gathered. The lepers are careful in approaching Jesus. They know who he is, but they keep their distance as they cry out for his mercy. Jesus sees them, and sends them off to the priests. Why? Because the priests were the arbiters of ritual cleanliness. They decided who was free to enter the temple, to interact with others, to share food. The lepers obediently followed Jesus' command, and, as they did, their leprosy was cured. They were made clean. The priests would complete the healing process by giving them permission to return from the margins to their lives, restored to right relationship with their families, friends and neighbors. One of the lepers did not go to the priests. He knew that it would not do him any good. Leprosy was not the only thing that kept him on the margins. He was a Samaritan. To the Jewish community, he was unclean simply by his birth, and Jesus' healing him did not change that.

Jesus saw the lepers and knew they needed help, help that he could and did give them. The Samaritan saw that he was healed and it made him turn back – because he did not just see that he was healed. He saw that it was God who was responsible and, when he realized that, he had to turn back and praise God with a loud voice. All ten lepers had cried to Jesus for mercy, but only the Samaritan cried out his praise. This time he did not keep his distance. He lay down at Jesus' feet and he thanked him. Jesus notes the lack of gratitude on the part of the other nine, and then tells the prostrated Samaritan to get up and go on his way. But the English translation does us a disservice here, because the Greek word for "get up" is the same word that is used for "rise" and "raised up" by the Gospel writers as they describe the Resurrection of our Lord. Jesus is not just telling the man to get up off the ground. He is raising him to new life. The Samaritan is not just cured of leprosy. His faith has made him whole. He recognizes that God has been at work in his life and he gives God the glory. He is restored to health and wholeness, and he becomes a participant in the work of God. One could appropriately say that

he has experienced salvation. The Greek word used here for "made you well" could also be translated as "saved you."

In ECCT, we talk a lot about God's mission. And many of us confuse "God's mission" with what is often called "outreach." On your parish website, "mission and outreach" is what comes up if you click on "volunteer opportunities." Volunteering is indeed a way of participating in God's mission. But God's mission is also so much more, and today's gospel passage helps us see that fuller picture. God's mission, revealed in Jesus Christ, is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. If God's mission could be defined fully by "good works" projects, then Jesus would have devoted his life to opening clinics, soup kitchens and homeless shelters. And I am not saying those are not part of God's mission, because Jesus does do those things, in one way or another. But they are not the whole story. They are pointers to a saving God. God's mission is about healing brokenness, wherever it is found, and particularly in relationships: relationships between people, between people and God, and, I would add, between people and creation. To experience God's healing is to experience transformation: to be no longer bound by sin, or pain, or death.

There is a profound sense of brokenness in the world today. Things are changing today in ways we cannot really understand or control. Things seem to be falling apart, and the church is no exception. Many of the ways of doing things that worked so well for so many years are becoming no longer useful or relevant. All mainline western churches are facing significant losses of members and financial support, as our elders leave us. Younger people are curious about God. Many want to nurture their spiritual lives. And the vast majority of them want nothing to do with today's church. Evangelical churches are behind the mainline by about a decade, but they are not immune to these inevitable demographic trends. There is no magic formula that will bring young families in to "save us." Our best minds have been on that for forty years, and here we are. This is not about us doing anything wrong. This is about the world changing around us.

The Church no longer holds a privileged place in our culture. In fact, its existence is barely acknowledged. And, while that does not feel good for many of us, it's not necessarily a bad thing. We are still in relationship with a saving God. We are on the cusp of what Bishop

Douglas calls, "a New Missional Age." We are being called to remember that the Church is a living body, and it has not always looked or lived the same way. It looked very different in the first century and in the tenth. The twentieth century Church, the church that many of us have known and loved our whole lives, is unraveling. AND the world needs the gospel message of hope and healing more than ever. It's not easy to be confronted with the uncomfortable truth that the identity and the incarnation of the Church cannot be limited by our personal preferences, by what we think we know, or by what makes us feel good. As Bishop Douglas is fond of saying, "This is God's Church, and God will have the Church God needs to carry out God's mission of salvation."

God is reminding us that our faith is rooted not in the status quo, not in things staying the same, but in change, in the ultimate transformation. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's power to heal brokenness, to transform death into life, is incontrovertibly revealed. New life never looks like old life. Resurrection is not a re-boot. It's a new beginning. Today, we're being called to new ways – not just new ways of doing what we've always done, but new ways of being the Church. And the only way to find those ways, to discern and move into God's future, is to be willing to let go of the old ways and be open to what God may be doing. That is what the Samaritan leper did. That is what faithful people have always done. Jesus has made God's priorities clear. Jesus never counted people or money. The purpose of the Church is not to be big, successful and affluent. Growth in numbers is not a bad thing, but it cannot be our goal. We're here to be part of God's radical, saving, life-giving, world-changing work.

For decades, we have focused on building up our church (and by that we mostly meant our individual parishes) – and maybe not so much for the sake of the gospel, maybe not for the purpose of healing the brokenness of the world, but maybe for the sake of the church itself. And now we're being confronted with the reality that there is no program guaranteed to restore the church to the past many of us remember so fondly. It seems that we may have focused on the growth of the church at the expense of authentic discipleship, as if our primary job was to keep the church in business. Maybe we wanted to grow the church so we could preserve what we have – so we could keep doing all the things we've been doing. The truth is that Jesus has called us not to a beautiful building, not to a convenient, comfortable hour on

Sunday morning, but to a transformational way of life. We are members of Christ's body, invited by God, loved by God, equipped by God - not to save the Church or even to build up the Church - but to work with God to transform the world, a world whose brokenness has never been more obvious. Mission is not about projects. It is a way of life.

The emphasis in today's gospel story is not on the project. The physical miracle is not the focus. This story is about faithful response to God's being at work in our lives. All ten of the lepers had faith that Jesus could heal them. All ten cried out for his mercy. But our faith is more than simply knowing where to turn in times of trouble. It's not just about having Jesus as our emergency contact. Our faith is also lived and nourished by gratitude. We don't thank God just because it's polite. We thank God as a way of recognizing and acknowledging that God's grace is at work in our lives, that God, who does not have to do anything for us, has chosen to act in us and for us. Faith without gratitude is incomplete faith. For all we know, the other nine lepers were congratulating themselves on being smart enough to know whom to ask to heal them. Only the Samaritan recognized the full impact of the experience and responded faithfully. Only he knew that the healing was an act of grace, freely given by God who generously brings healing to the world. God heals him and he gives thanks. Participation in God's mission includes an attitude of gratitude.

The ten lepers formed a community bound by the experience of leprosy. It did not matter that one was a Samaritan. In terms of identity, being a leper trumped being a Samaritan. This man lost his community, when healing destroyed the bond of leprosy. Nine went to see the priests and resumed their lives. One went back to praise God and thank Jesus. And by acknowledging the one responsible for this miracle, he joins a new community – one in which it did not matter that he was a Samaritan. He becomes one of the followers of Jesus, a community bound by the belief that Jesus is doing the work of God: that is, bringing healing to all of creation. We are called not just to good works, but to build communities of hope and healing with all that we have and all that we are, and not just here, but everywhere. God is calling the Church to get up, to be resurrected, to move towards new life. May we respond with the faithfulness of the Samaritan leper.