Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Maybe those nine newly healed lepers were “Nones.” I don’t mean they were “nuns”—that monastic order for women in the Roman Catholic Church. I’m suggesting the nine newly healed lepers who did not return to thank Jesus for their healing were “Nones”: N-O-N-E-S.

“Nones” is the current-day term given to Americans who do not identify with any specific religion. The “Nones” are the ones who, if taking a survey that asked what religion they were affiliated with (such as Christian, Jewish and so on), would respond “None of the above.”

The Pew Research Center, in its Religion and Public Life Project, polled the United States public in 2012, and discovered that one-fifth of Americans (and a third of adults under 30) consider themselves unaffiliated with any religion. “None of the above” is what they check-marked. And while you may not have heard the description “Nones,” you may have heard the common expression coming from “Nones” which is this: “I am spiritual but not religious.” You can tell that because two thirds of the “Nones” say they believe in God. But they are not looking for a particular religion or religious community, and are not intending to become committed to either.

While I am only guessing here, I suppose some of us in this room might consider ourselves “Nones”—not really affiliated with the Christian Church in terms of membership, not necessarily intending to commit ourselves to this community or some other faith community, yet somehow seeing ourselves as spiritual, or as believing in God. If there are “Nones” among us, I am very glad you are here, and I welcome you in the name of Christ. Christ welcomes you here as well. But I suspect most of the “Nones” you and I know are at Starbucks right now, or buying their family’s weekly groceries at Giant, or catching up on today’s headlines, or raising money for charity in a 5K race, or going in any number of different directions and activities.

I began by saying that maybe the nine newly healed lepers who did not come back to thank Jesus were “Nones.” Let me backtrack a bit in order to explain why I said that. In the Middle East at the time of the earthly Jesus, and for centuries preceding Jesus, people with various skin diseases were viewed with suspicion and fear. Any skin lesion, from acne to psoriasis to what we know today as Hansen’s Disease (Leprosy) were lumped into the category of Leprosy. A person who had such lesions and such a label was shunned as unclean. They could not associate with their community or attend worship. Considered contagious, lepers were forced.
to live outside villages, either in isolation, or in small clusters with other lepers. They had to warn those who came near, calling out “Unclean! Unclean!” That was their fate for life, unless by some miracle or happenstance they were healed. Then, if they were Jews, they were to present themselves to the priest, who would declare them clean, and they could rejoin society again. That was the way to go.

Well, lo and behold, that miracle happened in today’s Gospel lesson. Luke tells us how Jesus entered a village, and ten lepers approached him, calling him by name, calling him “Master” and begging for mercy. Isn’t it interesting? They did not shout “Unclean! Unclean!” as warning. Isn’t it interesting? They actually approached him, as opposed to retreating, letting him pass by and not risk his becoming unclean because of them. So it seems these ten lepers know something of Jesus, have heard something in the voices of passers-by that this man Jesus had power to heal. Maybe what these ten lepers had was a little bit of faith and a whole lot of hope in the one they heard cured others. It was worth the risk to approach him.

Jesus doesn’t say “I pronounce you healed” or “Be healed.” All he says is “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Which is pretty much the same thing, in my book. No use going to the priests if the lesions remained. You’d only go to the priests if you had been healed. So it seems they are confident something good is going to happen. And off they go.

Luke tells us that as they went, they were “made clean.” They’d already left Jesus behind, and somewhere else along the way, that healing occurred. Now, when this happened, did the lepers stop short in rapt amazement? Did they stand still, gazing in wonder at arms and legs with skin now soft and smooth? We don’t know. We also don’t know whether the nine lepers continued on to the priests or not. All we know is they didn’t turn back to where they’d been. This miserable chapter in their life was over, and they were moving on. Perhaps they would stop to see the priest, if only to get that Grade A stamp of approval. Jesus and the priests were merely a means to an end for them, which was back into life, doing whatever.

But the 10th leper did turn back. Which makes me think that he alone stood stock-still and took in this moment where healing had occurred. He let it all sink in, and then he made the connection. He made the connection that the man Jesus back there and this miraculous moment here had something to do with one another. So much so that showing himself to the priest could wait. That was not the way to go. The way to go was back to Jesus, in whom this newly healed leper had experienced the sheer goodness and power of God. The way to go was back to this Jesus and thank him, praising God for this blessing. In fact, the more the 10th leper thought about it, the more he realized there was a connection between Jesus and God. At the outskirts of a village in a moment of time where he had only known hopelessness and rejection and even self-loathing, he suddenly could see the hand of God at work in his life through Jesus. The more he thought about what had happened, the more attention he paid to what had happened, the more grateful he became, and that produced such a faith in him that he tossed out the window the idea of worshipping God anywhere else but at the feet of Jesus. When the leper returned to thank Jesus and worship at his feet, Jesus said, “Get up and go on your way; you faith has made you well.” And “well” is simply not a strong-enough
translation here. Jesus is saying literally “your faith has saved you”—which says that something more than a healing from leprosy has taken place there in the man at the feet of Jesus. This man has been changed heart and soul, made whole. He’s been given new life—not just a clean bill of health. He has a whole new way of being, in relation to God and those around him. And the 10th leper knows that.

And all because he paid attention to what happened to him in the presence of Jesus. The other nine did not pay attention, and hence, made no connection between Jesus and their healing. It had been a blessing from the hand of God in their lives, but they didn’t recognize that. Maybe that’s the problem for the “Nones” in our world. Maybe they aren’t exactly paying attention to what God is doing in their lives. If they’re not paying attention, they just head off down the road in any direction they please, without turning back to express gratitude to God for blessings given. Maybe if they turned back, they’d find a greater blessing still—a life planted deep in the heart of God. A life where God is deeply planted in the heart. That’s exactly what the 10th leper found.

Welsh poet and Anglican priest R. S. Thomas probes this truth in his poem “The Bright Field”:

I have seen the sun break through  
To illuminate a small field for a while,  
And gone my way and forgotten it  
But that was the pearl of great price,  
The one field that had the treasure in it.  
I realize now that I must give all that I have to possess it.
Life is not hurrying on to a receding future,  
Nor hankering after an imagined past.  
It is turning aside like Moses  
To the miracle of a lit bush,  
To a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once,  
But is the eternity that awaits you.

Will you and I, in our busy, distracted lives where we feel over-committed to a thousand different tasks, and moving in a thousand different directions at last commit ourselves to discipleship in Jesus’ name? Will we stop and look and wonder in amazement at how God is working out his kingdom in our lives, crazy as things can be at times? Will we pay attention, notice where the love of God shines bright in those fields of tiny moments in which each of us live? And will we turn back to our Lord and thank him for gifts graciously bestowed on us? Will we thank God for letting us approach him, even in our brokenness and uncleanness, and then thank him for truly making us well so that we can lean forward into the future with hope and joy? For this is the way to go. AMEN.

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