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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23C)

October 9, 2016

Text: Luke 17:11–19

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What might 3 widows and 10 lepers have in common? Why share a common reading on this 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost? It might help us answer the question if we review the particulars. The 3 widows are from the OT reading from Ruth 1. Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, along with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, leave Israel during a famine in order to find food in Moab. Moab was located just east of the Dead Sea. The OT does not forbid God's people from sojourning in Moab but Elimelech's decision to leave the Promised Land during a famine strongly suggests impatience at best or unbelief at worst. The Lord had promised to provide for His people. Can any good come from these questionable beginnings?

While living in Moab, Mahlon married Ruth; Chilion married Orpah, both Moabite women. For a while there was hope of renewed fortunes and a prosperous future. But alas! In the course of time, all three men died: the father, Elimelech and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Three funerals and three widows with bleak futures ahead of them.

The 10 lepers appear in today's gospel reading. They lived in Israel, the Promised Land, about 1,100 years after the time of Elimelech, Naomi, and Ruth. We don't know their names nor do we know their history. There are two facts that we know about them. First, all ten were lepers, a most cursed skin disease. In the ancient world, leprosy was bitterly feared. More often than not, it meant isolation from family, friends, and community. It was a living death. Second, nine of those lepers were Jews, one was a Samaritan. That one Samaritan was doubly cursed. Even without leprosy, he would have had to endure the scorn and disdain of the Jews who considered the Samaritan to be half-breeds, contaminated with idolatry and spiritual compromise.

These two histories, separated by over 1,000 years, share at least one, common thread. In the midst death, tragedy, and suffering, two foreigners find salvation in the one true God of Israel. For the rest of this service, I would like to keep before you the biblical theme of God's love and saving grace coming to all people, regardless of their race,

history, or circumstance. And I trust that we will be able to find our own story in these Biblical accounts.

Let's begin with Ruth, the Moabitess. She is the widow of Mahlon. They did not have any children so her prospects for the future looked grim indeed. Her life promised to be one of hardship and depravation. Her poor mother-in-law, Naomi, decides to return to Israel. Naomi gives her two daughters-in-law the opportunity to stay in Moab. "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband" (1:8–9).

It's a most tender scene. Can't you just imagine it? Three women weeping bitterly as the elderly woman is leaving the only two people left in her life. Naomi has lost her husband and two sons to death. And now she faces losing her two daughters-in-law. In great sadness, Orpah kissed Naomi and left. We never hear about her again. But Ruth clung to Naomi and expressed some of the most passionate words in all of Holy Scripture. These words express her faith in the one true God of Israel under whom she turns to find life and salvation: "Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you'" (1:16–17).

As you know, Ruth goes to Israel with Naomi. She marries Boaz; it's a beautiful story of romance and intrigue. She gives birth to Obed, the grandfather to King David. The Lord Jesus traces His earthly lineage through Ruth! The Lord worked through famine, death, fear and uncertainty to bring about His saving will for the world. Your salvation is found in Ruth's history! The Messianic line runs through Ruth, a foreigner who sought refuge and life from the Lord of heaven and earth in the Promised Land.

Ruth is a model of faith and faithfulness. She grew up in Moab, worshipping the false god Chemosh. She repented of her idolatry and embraced the God of Israel in faith. In that faith, she lived the rest of her life, worshipping God in truth and purity. Her faithfulness is demonstrated in her loyalty to Naomi, her mother-in-law and then later to her husband Boaz. To all of you women, young and old, you would be hard pressed to find a better role model. By God's grace, may all of you be women of faith and faithfulness. And I am confident of this in you all, through the grace of the Lord Jesus. For the Lord Jesus has called you unto Himself through baptism and saving faith.

God's Holy Spirit dwells within your hearts and minds. As God remains faithful to you, so you shall remain faithful to Him and to all whom the Lord brings into your lives: your parents, husbands, children, grandchildren, friends, and so forth. Did we not hear these words of praise from the apostle Paul during last week's service? Words of praise spoken about two women of faith and faithfulness?

Paul wrote, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. For this reason (i.e., Timothy's faith which also was found in his mother and grandmother!) I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (II Timothy 1:5-7).

Now the 10 lepers. The Lord Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to redeem the world by His death and resurrection. He's in the northern border region between Samaria and Galilee. As I've already said, Samaria and the Samaritans were despised by the Jews. While near this questionable area, 10 lepers see Jesus. Lifting up their voice, the 10 lepers cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (vs. 13).

Jesus gives them some rather strange instructions, "God and show yourselves to the priests" (vs. 14). OT Law, Leviticus 13, stated that anyone who thought they were cleansed of their leprosy had to go to the priest so that he could pronounce them clean. Then they would be able to return home and reenter the life of God's people. Jesus doesn't touch them as He had done with other lepers. The Lord doesn't speak a word of healing. Instead, He commands them to go back to the priests. In essence, Jesus is telling them to act as if they were healed!

While on the way to the Temple in Jerusalem, the 10 lepers were healed. Can't you just imagine the joy! No more isolation. No more calling out "unclean, unclean." Everything looked great except for the Samaritan. He couldn't go into the Temple to offer the appropriate sacrifices like the other 9 lepers. He alone realized what should be done. Go back to Jesus! With a loud voice, He praised God and fell at Jesus' feet giving Him thanks (vs. 16). Only this foreigner returns to Jesus to give thanks.

That detail doesn't escape our Lord's notice. Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (vs. 17-19). A foreigner turns to God in faith, just like Ruth before him. This Samaritan leper not only finds healing from his dreadful disease, but faith unto

salvation. Jesus said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well” (vs. 19).

Two foreigners find salvation in the one true God of Israel. Ruth and this Samaritan leper didn’t seem to be likely people to embrace God in faith. Everything was against them and yet through their hardships and afflictions, the Lord of love and grace brought them to Himself in saving faith.

Their stories are now your stories. All of us were foreigners and outcasts. None of us are Jews by birth. Thus, we are outside the covenant promises of God. And all of us are inflicted, not with leprosy which can be cured quite easily today with modern medicine, but with sin, which has no medical cure. Only God can treat our disease of sin. Only God can change our status of foreigner and outcast and call us His redeemed children. These things He does for us, through the cleansing, healing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ, we are adopted children of our heavenly Father and cleansed of all impurity of body and soul. Ruth and the cleansed leper are us.

The apostle Paul makes these very conclusions in Ephesians 2. Listen to them and rejoice:

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no 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. For he himself is our peace ... And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone... (Eph. 2:12–20).

Like Ruth and the healed leper, let us rejoice and give thanks for the mighty work of salvation done in our lives. We are the Lord’s baptized and redeemed children. The Lord God is our God. Rise and go your way; your faith in Jesus has made you well.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.