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Sermon #461 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, Pennsylvania
8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 14, 2007

“A Plethora of Miracles”

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19; 20 Pentecost C (Proper 23)

So, today’s story from Luke’s gospel is a bargain at any price, because while we may hear it as a miracle story in which Jesus heals a bunch of sick people --- lepers, to be specific--- there are at least four miracles in this story, as I count them, and the healing may not be the most incredible part.

But let’s start with those lepers. Ten of them at a distance. And why at a distance? Because they are not allowed to approach other people. They are sick. They cannot mingle with others in the streets. They cannot sleep within the villages or buy food at the market places. They are unclean, marked by the pox of leprosy. Their skin is dying. So, diseased in skin, they are also shunned in body and spirit. Held at a distance by the strong arm of the Law, these ten sick people have to yell to Jesus, because they can’t come close: “Master, have mercy on us!”

And then the first miracle occurs. The scripture says, “When [Jesus] saw them...”

Late last week I was in Center City in one of the train stations, and, having a few things I was carrying with me, I rode the elevator from the platform to the street level. And when the doors of the elevator opened, there was a man lying there completely spread out on the ground, right there on the sidewalk, napping with his head on a rolled-up jacket, likely his only possession. I nearly had to step right over him in order to get by and go on my way. But pausing a moment, I took in the whole scene. With all the hustle and bustle of the city, people moving quickly here and there, with all their goals and their schedules, this one homeless man on the sidewalk lay in clear sight of everyone; therefore, he was completely unseen. Tuned out by the passers by. I guess we expect to see him there, so we ignore him and get on with the day.

I wonder... how many people in Jesus' day passed by the lepers in the streets, not turning an eye toward their imploring cries, pretending they did not exist, hurrying and scurrying past as quickly as possible, so as not to be infected by their disease or by any sense of pity or responsibility toward them? Well, maybe many did, but not Jesus. He sees them. And I wonder, just what does he see?

There is the obvious. These lepers carry the marks of their illness upon their skins as clearly as a leopard carries its spots upon its fur. But what else might Jesus see? Maybe husbands, fathers, sons or daughters, people separated from loved ones, formerly prosperous shopkeepers, once respected and learned scholars, laborers and servants, children of well-meaning parents? These people are not simply walking diseases. Jesus sees human beings; and that is the first miracle.

But then comes the second. Seeing these sick individuals, he tells them what to do: *Let the priests see you. Show yourselves to them.* Here is a strange commandment indeed. You see, it is the priests in those days who determine whether or not one is infected by the diseases of the skin and bound by the Law to live as outcasts until they are pronounced clean. All these lepers have already seen the priests, and they are pronounced unclean and doomed to their lonely and barren existence. And Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests? Let the priests see you?

Now, these people have every right, in my opinion, to be disappointed, disillusioned, angered, and insulted by Jesus' simple response to their deadly serious illness. They ask for healing, and they get a road trip. I wonder if it feels for them like it feels sometimes for us when we ask for answers to the deepest and

most challenging questions of our lives ---Why is my loved one ill? How come I cannot find meaningful work? Why can't I be sure of what I believe? How do I help my children? What am I supposed to do with my life?--- and some people insist on giving us such simple answers like: "Well, just pray about it" or "Maybe you should go to church" or "God will help you when you need it." It sounds too simple. A little like: "Go show yourselves to the priests." I guess those lepers could have complained: *But we have, Jesus, and we are sick.* Yet here is the second miracle of the story: They go. I guess with a little faith, a little hope, a little humility, they just go. No arguments, no complaints. They give faith a chance. Now, how miraculous is that?

And then comes the third miracle, the one we are all expecting. The lepers are healed. They don't even have to make it all the way to the priests before it happens. It just happens, once they get on with their journey.

And then comes the fourth miracle, the one nobody was expecting.

One of the former lepers, just one of these former outcasts, feeling new health come upon him, knowing that gift of healing deep within his heart, this one turns back for just a moment to thank the one who had seen him for real in the first

place, the one who had seen him as more than a mass of disease, the one who sees him as a human being.

And of all ten who experienced the cure for their leprosy, only this one returned to offer his thanks. And this one, among all the others, would have been the least expected to do such a thing, because he was a Samaritan, a foreigner and an outcast in Jewish society even before he was a leper. Likely no one of Jesus' company would have expected such gratitude, such manners, such dignity and decency of this man. And thus the fourth miracle is made complete: It may have been Jesus' power that healed the Samaritan's leprosy, but, as Jesus says, it is the Samaritan's faith that has made him well. Even a Samaritan, who most everyone else thought was a sinful and indecent man, could be faithful in God's eyes.

Now, no one goes riding off into the sunset here. For all that happened that day so long ago, those lepers who were made clean still had to face all the uncertainties of life, the diseases that would come with living and aging in their futures, and one day they would die. Yet, on that day, at least one man saw his healing deeper within himself, deep within his spirit, for despite all that he had endured, all from which he was healed, and all the challenge and struggle, even illness, that he would most certainly endure again in this difficult life, he took the

time to look for his redeemer, he took the time to be thankful, and he gave the time to praise God and offer thanks for what was done for him. Surely this is a miracle we can all appreciate.

Better than that, surely this is a miracle in which we all can participate.