



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, October 13, 2013**  
*The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist  
at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels  
on Luke 17:11-19  
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*TO BE WHERE GOD IS*

If you were a leper in the first century, you were pretty bad off. Nobody wanted to be around you; no one ever touched you; people preferred not to even look at you. People suffering from what was referred to as leprosy lived on the margins of the community as wild and frightening images of how bad off a human being could be. So it's no surprise that when Jesus comes across a leper, he comes across ten of them—lepers being the only people who are willing to be around lepers.

They kept their distance from Jesus, as they had been taught, so they shouted to him from afar: "Jesus, Master," they said, "Have mercy on us." Mercy is something that would've been in short supply for them: they got no mercy from their kinsfolk; no mercy from their fellow villagers; no mercy, that they could discern, even from God. They were the lowest of the low, and they cried, "Have mercy on us."

According to Luke, Jesus responds simply, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Go to the Temple, in other words, and show yourselves to the religious leaders there. This they must have experienced as a promising sign: the diseases from which these lepers suffered meant that they were outside not only their community, but outside the religious purity system, and therefore outside the regular cycle of worship that took place at the Temple. Perhaps it was possible—maybe they thought that perhaps it was possible that, at Jesus' instruction, those priests would undo that exclusionary sentence somehow, and welcome them back into the worshipping fold. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus' relationship with the Temple is much more amiable than it is in some of the other gospels, and clearly word had gotten out that Jesus had some kind of religious authority. Maybe he could bring them back: back to the Temple, and, therefore, back to God.

What happened, though, was better than they could have imagined. As they were going along, as Jesus had told them to, they were actually, made clean; their leprosy disappeared; they were whole again. So now they were back. Back to health! Back to the community. Back to everyday relationships. Back to the Temple. And so back to worship there, to worship of the God of Israel.

At least, nine of them were. But for one of the lepers the instruction to go to the Temple was complicated, and would have dredged up ancient memories of religious rivalry, a painful awareness of a perceived inferiority and even threats of violence. That's because one of the ten was a Samaritan, and the Samaritans had their own priests, and their own Temple; and the conflict between the Jews and Samaritans was fierce. And so when Jesus told the group to go to "the

Temple,” presumably he meant his Temple, the Temple in Jerusalem, and that meant that, for one of them, he was still out of luck. The other nine, once healed, could be continually in the Temple, praising God. Not so, the Samaritan. With leprosy, he was ritually impure and excluded from Jewish Temple worship. Without leprosy, he was still ritually impure and excluded from Jewish Temple worship. His healing raised again for him the painful question of worship that had dogged relations between Jews and Samaritans for literally centuries, and would for at least another hundred years.

While the other nine were rejoicing, then, the Samaritan leper had a problem. He had to figure something out, something very important: he had to discern where God lived. The Samaritan alone was faced with an incredibly significant, incredibly difficult, religious decision to make that was as fraught and complicated as one could imagine.

And faced with this choice, he did something altogether different. He went back to Jesus. The Samaritan leper—just like the other nine—wanted to be where God was, he wanted to live where God lived. The Samaritan alone, however, went and fell at Jesus’ feet, and gave him the thanks, and the worship, that belonged by right to God alone. He, and only He, saw God in Christ. So he felt at Jesus’ feet and praised God incarnate.

We admire this healed Samaritan for his discernment, and for the gratitude he showed. But what’s the big deal about showing gratitude, to God in particular? After all, God doesn’t need our gratitude, in the sense that it doesn’t make God’s life any better if I give him thanks. My prayers don’t buoy his spirits when he’s feeling down; I don’t ever make God’s day. God doesn’t lack anything, so there’s no “giving back” to him in the normal sense of the word. He doesn’t need anything we have to give him since it all came from him in the first place; he doesn’t even need our gratitude.

But we could say that we come to God to offer our prayers, and songs, of thanksgiving, because, like the leper, we want to be where God is; we want to live where God lives. Not for God’s sake; but for our own sake. And to be where God is, is to be where Christ is. This is what the Samaritan realized; this is what the earliest apostles realized, and it’s true even today. God is particularly present in the world, in the body of his Son, which is the body of Christ—we believe that that is where we are able to see God. Even today he is here, because it is at the altar where the body of Christ is made present. By the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ, and it is made, there, visible. See-able. Touchable. Taste-able. And so we pray at the altar; we kneel, like the Samaritan, at the altar; and we give Christ the thanks and worship that belong by right to God alone.

We don’t do this to help God out. We do it because it’s good for us to be where Christ is. Just ask the lepers, all ten of them. It’s good—it’s very good—to be where Christ is present.

Unless this is your first time at Saint Thomas, then I imagine that you return because you find worship at Saint Thomas to be worship at a place where God is; where God in Christ is made visible, touchable, and taste-able. Not the only place, certainly; but one place where we can experience being in the presence of God. And we’re able to do that, you and I, in the year 2013—we’re able to come into this particular building, and listen to this kind of choral music sung in this particular way, and worship the Lord in this particular manner—we can do that only because thousands and thousands of grateful Samaritans who have felt God’s mercy have come here before us and made it possible. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and in gratitude, they grew this parish, over the last almost two hundred years, so that the world could come here and meet Jesus Christ.

God doesn’t need anything from us, but the world certainly does. The world needs to be able to worship here, at a place where God is. The Samaritan responded with thanksgiving to what he had been given, which was not just his health, but a life in Christ. And our thanksgiving, like his,

is a joyful testimony about, and acknowledgment of, what is already the case: that God has reached out in Christ to draw the whole world to himself. Jews; Samaritans; Gentiles; lepers; the healthy: everybody. Thank God: we are able to be in one place where God is; through his mercy, we are able to live where God lives, and we come here to celebrate that fact; as generations before us have, and, by our sacrifices, and enabled by the Holy Spirit, generations after us will be able to as well.