



**Extreme Joy**  
**2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Luke 17:11-19**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (October 9, 2022)**

Russia has just annexed four Ukrainian regions through an illegal referendum. If you ask the locals, they say they are temporarily Russian and temporarily occupied. If you ask Moscow, they don't know how much territory they have annexed, and the borders are kind of fluid.

The gospel reading tells us that Jesus is traveling through the region between Samaria and Galilee while on his way to Jerusalem. It's a buffer zone between the two sides considered safe and hard to distinguish. Perhaps that is why these ten men with leprosy are located here: neither side wants them. So they are in this borderland, although this space socially isolates them and economically relegates them to meager living.

We know this story well, don't we? Jesus heals 10 lepers. One, a Samaritan, comes back to thank him. We have heard it a thousand times: It's all about gratitude, right?

Well, yes and a number of other lessons.

First, it tells us that people on both sides of a border hurt; people on both sides of the border want to be treated as human beings with dignity and respect; and people on both sides of the border bear the image of God. Persons made in the image of God, carry divinity inside. God's image in me is the same divine image in you and in all persons, independently of the external factors of color, language, education, class, nationality, and wealth. There is a sacredness of being that comes from God's act of creating. Every person is sacred, every animal, and all of creation is sacred because desired and brought to life by the creative act of God, imbued with God's imprint, God's image.

Second, the story shows us how God is often revealed in places of human hopelessness. God is at work among all people, often bringing hope where they have lost hope, doing so regardless of whether they stop to give thanks. In fact, love is the nature of God.

When the Samaritan returned, Jesus, like a shepherd worried about the nine on the road instead of the one in front of him, asks, "Where are the others?" He should know: They were doing exactly what Jesus told them to do. They were going to show themselves to the priest just as the Law required. So, why does Jesus even ask? What does he want to know?

Let's review the story. Ten lepers, guarding the proper distance from healthy people, ask Jesus for mercy. This is no clear and doable request: What does mercy mean? Do they make the same request of any passersby? Are they asking for food, or alms, or do they think he can heal them? Did they know it was Jesus? What idea did they have of Jesus? Keeping his distance and without touching, Jesus sends them to the priest. Without any additional action on Jesus' part, without any other words, "as they were going, they were cleansed." Only one of them, a Samaritan,

comes back and throws himself at the feet of Jesus. The other nine seem to be ordinary religious people, doing what they were told to do. Certainly, they were happy, but we know nothing more about them, not even if they were Jews or Samaritans.

The Samaritan realizes that he has been offered more than a cure. Instead of going to the priest, he returns like someone crazed with delight, shouting God's praises. And what did Jesus do? Instead of dancing with him, Jesus asked, "What about the rest?" he could easily imagine what happened to them: they went to the temple just as he instructed.

Is Jesus lamenting that they didn't get deeper message? Did he see the meager 1% return of his ministry investment as negative feedback and lack of appreciation? I doubt it. If he did that then ministry would be about himself: he would judge himself by the number of people he was able to turn to God. But the focus of his ministry was not himself but the people he impressed with his genuine care.

I suspect he was excited that they all went to the temple just as the Law prescribes but *before* they realized they were about to be cured. That showed a firm trust in his word. But I also suspect that he was ecstatic to see that at least one person came back praising God. And, again, not as an acknowledgment of his healing ministry but as a sign that something was born in the man beyond routine and legalistic obedience to the Law. What delights Jesus is a faith come alive.

In fact, Jesus bent over the healed believer at his feet and said, "Rise up. *Your* faith has saved you."

Ten people with leprosy asked to be cleansed. Nine received their health and presumably returned rejoicing to the life from which they had been cut off. The 10th man somehow realized that there was more available to him. He was more than restored; his interaction with Jesus allowed him to access God's healing presence in himself, and that produces the joy of the Gospel.

The 10 lepers story just as the story of Naaman the Syrian become a teaching about prayer. We can ask for what we need and rejoice when we receive it. We can live in religious obedience, returning to the temple grateful for what we have. Or, taking Naaman and this stranger believer as our models, we can trust God in our hearts and receive the joy God wants to give us. That's the breadth of the mercy of God.

We trust and so we worship.

Let us close with the words of the author of the letter to the Ephesians:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)