

The Power of the Scars

By Linda Rex

October 9, 2022, PROPER 23—Have you ever thought about the profound power a scar has to transport you into another time or place? A scar holds within itself the capacity to remind us of events, people, and experiences. A scar can remind us of suffering, of pain, of healing, and of forgiveness.

I believe this is why the apostle John in his apocalyptic book of Revelation gave us a picture of Jesus bearing the scars of the cross as he sits in glory. I believe it is significant that Jesus chooses at times to bear the marks of our betrayal, condemnation and murder of him as God in human flesh. This brings to mind his initial post-resurrection appearances in the upper room, where he showed the disciples his hands and side where he had received such severe wounds. It was the scars he bore that enabled them to see that the One who died was the One who lived again.

The difference between the scars that Jesus bears and our scars, whether physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual, is that within Jesus' scars lies our redemption, healing, and restoration. Whatever we may carry with us through this life he bears within his own human flesh—a thought which can give us great comfort when the scars we bear today remind us of the pain, suffering and loss we have experienced.

In this Sunday's gospel passage, Luke 17:11–19, Jesus encounters ten men who had been ostracized from society due to their leprosy. As the story unfolds, we discover that some of the people in this group of lepers were Jews and some were Samaritans. It is significant that the nature of this disease was such that lepers were forbidden to be around other people (they were considered ritually unclean), and this exclusion by society actually created a small leper community where normal social barriers were ignored.

The ten men called out to Jesus from a distance, simply asking him for mercy. Jesus often touched the ritually unclean when he healed them, but this time Jesus didn't get close to the lepers at all. He simply told them to go and show themselves to the priests, honoring the rite given in the Torah regarding ritual cleansing of healed lepers. And as the ten men walked away, assumably traveling towards Jerusalem, they were cleansed.

As Luke is telling this story, he introduces an unexpected twist. It would make sense for the ten men to simply walk away, go to the temple for the ceremony, and then go back to their everyday lives, returning to those tasks and relationships the leprosy had stolen from them. But by doing this, they would have missed the huge significance of what had just occurred in their lives.

As they travelled on their way, the leprosy on the men disappeared. One of the men stopped, convicted of the reality of something which had escaped his notice before—just who had answered their plea for mercy. Sparked within his heart was a well of gratitude that overflowed into loudly glorifying God, and running quickly to throw himself at the feet of Jesus. On his knees before Jesus, the healed leper thanked the Lord profusely.

Here, Jesus points out the astonishing reality to those standing about him, that the only person of the ten who returned to show appreciation was a Samaritan, a foreigner despised by the Jews. This was the only one who recognized who Jesus was and gave him the gratitude and honor he deserved. Jesus told the man to stand up and leave, that his faith had made him well.

What is often not seen in this parable is that it has a lot more to say than just simple home truths about gratitude and faith. In fact, it is an acted parable about what Jesus was actively working out as the One who came to deliver every one of us from the leprosy of evil, sin, and death. Unable

to free ourselves, incapable of restoring ourselves to right relationship with God, we all desperately needed God's redemption and salvation. As God came in human flesh, Jesus was headed toward death on the cross, a death not much different than that of the lepers he healed, who had lost everything, possibly including limbs and skin, due to their affliction.

It is important to pay attention to the reality that all ten lepers were healed. Jesus' healing involved all of the lepers even though only one, a Samaritan, returned to offer Jesus gratitude and glory to God. In the same way, Jesus has included all human flesh in his self-offering, in his death and resurrection, but not everyone sees the significance of the gift and responds with gratitude and adoration. In Christ's resurrection, all have risen, but their experience of that resurrection, of their healing and renewal, depends upon their response to Jesus in faith, seeing him for who he really is—their Savior and Lord.

The kingdom of God was present in that moment in the person of Jesus Christ. The man who returned to glorify God and thank Jesus was participating in the kingdom of God in his recognition of who Jesus was—his Healer and Redeemer. He was experiencing the kingdom reality of life in relationship with his loving Father through Jesus in the Spirit as the joy and wonder of what God did for him penetrated through the darkness in his soul and awakened him to divine light.

I started this blog with a thought about the power of scars. Did this man who returned to Jesus bear any scars from his bout with leprosy? Did he bear the scars of his broken relationships caused by his forced isolation? What was his life going to be like after having been healed?

When Jesus gives us new life, he doesn't simply erase our previous life. Often Jesus takes the scars of our previous life and brings them along with himself through death into resurrection, giving the scars of our lives tremendous power to testify of his goodness, love, and grace. Instead of hiding the wounds under guilt, shame, and fear—like a leper being isolated away from human society—we want to bring our wounds out into the light of Jesus, allowing him to transform them into scars which testify of God's love, grace and goodness by carrying them with him through death into resurrection.

This can be a difficult and scary process. Sometimes we need other people to walk through this journey of healing with us. Sometimes we need support and help. But we never go through any of this on our own. Jesus stands firm, having already declared our healing, calling us to walk it out day by day in a faith journey with him. Our part is simply, like this tenth leper, to offer up to our Triune God our gratitude and praise. And we allow our scars, shining with the healing grace of Jesus, to give a powerful testimony to what God does when we simply ask for mercy.

Lord, sometimes our wounds can seem to be overwhelming. We feel like the lepers in this story, isolated and despairing. We ask you, Jesus, for mercy. And, recognizing you have included us already in your death and resurrection, giving our scars a testimony of your grace, goodness, and love, we offer glory to you, Father, and thanks to you, Jesus, for all you have done by your Spirit. Amen.

“While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. As He entered a village, ten leprosy men who stood at a distance met Him; and they raised their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ When He saw them, He said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they were going, they were cleansed. Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered and said, ‘Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?’ And He said to him, ‘Stand up and go; your faith has made you well.’ ” Luke 17:11–19 NASB