

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Luke 17:11-19

Year C - Proper 23, Text: Luke 17:11-19
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Note: This Gospel text is also appointed to be read at Thanksgiving. Dr. Wendt wrote another commentary for that day dealing with the theme of gratitude and thankfulness. The commentary below addresses the same text, but focuses on the relationship between Jews and Samaritans.

Only Luke describes the incident referred to in this passage. Although the disciples probably would have been present, the passage does not refer to them. The setting for the incident is the borderland between Galilee and Samaria, and Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. Of the ten lepers referred to, one is a Samaritan and the others are presumably Galilean Jews.

Some background on the Samaritans

After the Assyrians crushed a revolt in Israel in 733–732 BC, they depopulated Galilee along with neighboring territories (2 Kings 15:29). After they finally destroyed Israel in 721 BC, they deported a significant percentage of the population in an attempt to pacify that part of their empire. They then forced Cuthians, from the mountain country of Persia and Media, to settle there (2 Kings 17:24). The end result was intermarriage — leading to the accusation by the Jews that those who had intermarried were not true Israelites. (In Luke 17:18, the Samaritan is referred to as a foreigner.) According to 2 Kings 17:27, the Assyrians eventually sent back one deported priest to teach the newcomers the ways of “the god of the land.”

The concern for ethnic purity did not arise until after the leadership of Jerusalem (deported in 587 BC) began to return from exile in Babylon in 538 BC. Then, for those who returned, ethnic purity was a very serious issue. They referred to those who had not gone into exile in Babylon as “the people of the land” (*am ha-aretz*, a term that had the connotation of “ignoramus”).

The northern region continued to be separated from Judea with the possible exception of a short period of

time during the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 23:15-20). It remained separate until forcibly annexed, probably by the Hasmonean ruler, John Hyrcanus, some time after 134 BC. When Herod succeeded to the throne of Palestine in 37 BC, the northern region became part of his realm. Before the annexation, it was not considered Jewish — not even Israelite.

It seems likely that the Jewish population of Galilee came from two sources. One was Judean Jews who moved north to make a living in the territory newly acquired by the Maccabees. Others were natives whose families had been forcibly converted to Judaism. Such pioneers and converts are often among the most passionate proponents of the cause of which they have become a part. It is well known that the Galilean Jews were passionate in relation to the cause of Judaism, and frequently and vigorously supported the cause of their nation against both Samaritans and Romans.

The Samaritans lived in the former tribal territory of Ephraim, the principle tribe of the former Northern Kingdom. Shechem was in the center of Samaria, and nearby Mount Gerizim was the territory’s holy site — the place of its temple until it was destroyed in 128 BC by the Hasmonean ruler, John Hyrcanus. Samaritans were often considered by the Jews to be as low as Gentiles!

Since lepers were excluded from the normal social life of Judaism, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Galilean lepers had slid down the social scale to the point where they would no longer have a problem associating with a fellow outcast from Samaria. After all, they themselves could not remain in their villages, eat a meal with their loved ones, or worship in the Temple in Jerusalem.

So these ten lepers band together in a fellowship of the forsaken. They eat together. They sleep together. They skip worship together. And together they call out to Jesus, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Jesus simply responds by telling them to show themselves

to the priests — meaning the local priest, and likely the one who had first identified them as lepers. At this point, nothing has changed in the outward appearance of the lepers. They are still lepers. They leave — and who knows what they are thinking?

However, while they are going, they are cleansed of their leprosy. And now the social distinction caused by leprosy is gone! But the old social distinctions return. The Samaritan would no longer be welcome by his former comrades. They go on their way. The Samaritan does not. He returns to that other Galilean, the One who had healed him, accepted him as he was, but not left him as he was. He thanks Jesus loudly, gives glory to God, and falls at Jesus' feet!

Jesus, in turn, points out that this one is a Samaritan, an *allogenes* (Greek), a foreigner who (according to the Jews) is not fit to be counted among the tribes of Israel, nor are his children. Jesus then commends him saying, "Arise! Go! Your faith has saved you!" How so? Jesus' word saves. The saving word is *anastasis* (Greek): "Rise! Resurrect! Welcome to new life! No longer are you a foreigner, but a man of faith — as Abraham had faith!" Galileans, Jews, Samaritans — all are called by the saving word, the word that gives new life.

The nine had also heard a word. It was a good word, and it offered them the goodness of God. Apparently, that's all they wanted. That's all they take away. Their bodies were touched, but not their souls! Although most likely the nine Galilean lepers no longer associate with the Samaritan, the latter has met another Galilean Who, in healing him, also reached out to him in unconditional acceptance. His healing reached out over ethnic hatred and touched his body and soul. As Paul would say, "Faith comes by what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

The Samaritan was accepted as he was — as a leper and a Samaritan. Jesus made no demand on him before speaking His word, healing his body, calling him to faith and a new resurrected life. Jesus accepted the man as he was, but Jesus did not leave him as he was!

In terms of the goodness of God, the man was no longer a leper. In terms of the grace of God, he was no longer dead in unbelief. He was accepted into the fellowship of those who followed the Man Who was going to die and to rise, so that all who are dead could live forever by faith.

If the disciples were present and witnessed Jesus' action, eventually they might have been happy to preserve a story that made a Samaritan look good and fellow Galileans look bad.