

## Cleaned Up Good

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 17:11-19

Pentecost 21C Oct. 9, 2016

he expression “you cleaned up good” is one you often hear around weddings when guys who usually wear torn jeans and greasy tee shirts suddenly find themselves in rented tuxes. It is something of a quantum leap sometimes, sort of a male version of Cinderella going from tattered rags to a ball gown and glass slippers.

“You cleaned up good” takes on another meaning, and has even more of a quantum leap involved, when you look at today’s Gospel story, the healing of ten people with a terrible skin disease—they called it leprosy. Here, the change wasn’t temporary but permanent, and was truly life-changing, and life-transforming.

Imagine growing up in Judea or Galilee back in Jesus’ day, part of a strong family. You grow up to learn a trade, you dance at weddings, you weep at funerals, you love and are loved, you go to the synagogue to pray and worship, you celebrate the Sabbath in your home with all your family around you. You are known as so-and-so’s son, or so-and-so’s daughter, or grandchild, or great-grandchild. Then you become sick. Sores develop, your fingertips and toes get numb, dead patches of skin. You are taken to the priest, who consults the Law, and sadly pronounces you unclean. You leave your family. You leave your job. You lose your identity. You lose your place in the community. You leave your life and become an outcaste. Now, people look at you with fear and revulsion. The only people you can be around are those with the same disease. You’re essentially homeless. You look at other lepers and see terrible damage to their bodies, and realize that this will someday be you. There’s no life left, just survival.

But still, isolated as you are, you hear stories. Sometimes kind and generous people will leave food for you, or a handful of coins, and maybe even talk with you, from a distance. And they tell of someone, Yeshua, or Jesus, as we would say, who has been preaching of God’s coming Kingdom from village to village. And not only does he preach, but he heals the sick. And not only does he heal the sick, but he forgives sins. You have often wondered, *what could I have done that was terrible enough that God would give me this terrible disease?* You examined every deed, every word, every motive, and you still couldn’t put a name to it. You felt guilty and isolated from God. *What could it have been? It must have been something.*

You talk with your nine fellow sufferers. Some scoff. Others say that since nobody else will have any direct human contact, why would this Jesus? But behind the words, there is a tiny glimmer of hope. Even Elihu the Samaritan has a little gleam in his eye. You have come to like Elihu, even though when you were well you were told to stay away from Samaritans because they were heretics, because they were unclean before God. But now you are unclean, so what does it matter? Those old social and religious boundaries didn't make much difference. Outside is outside.

Then, early one morning, with the sun casting long patterns of shadow and light across the tan sandy hills, the kind woman who lays bread for you at the edge of the road, on the other side of the ditch, sees you as you crouch half-hidden, shy, behind a shrub. "Friend? Remember when I told you about that rabbi Yeshua? They say that he is coming toward our village, that he will walk this very road!" When she leaves, you scramble across the ditch for the few loaves of bread, and run to share with your fellow sufferers both the bread and the news. You make plans. You plan to approach him as a group, and plead your case together. Elihu frowns. He says, "This rabbi of yours, he is Jewish, of course. Maybe it is best if I stay behind. I wouldn't want him to reject you because of me." But you say, "Elihu, one time I would have accepted that argument. Your beliefs and customs are different than mine, but we worship the same God. And this rabbi seems different than the others. All the walls of custom and race don't seem important to him. No, we will face him together."

And face him you did. You saw the man in the white robe, dusty around the edges, with a crowd of followers going with him. You cross the ditch and stay a respectful distance near the edge of the path, and he comes closer. The followers drop a step behind when they see your covered lips, your ravaged skin, but the teacher comes closer. You cry out together, "Jesus! Master! Have mercy upon us!" What will his mercy include? A blessing? Forgiveness? Maybe, just maybe, healing?

And he says, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." You're puzzled for a moment. Why would he ask us to do that? We could only go to the priests if—our skin had cleared, and we were asking him to declare us healed. Then we could go back to our families, to our towns, to our synagogues. And you looked at your arm, the back of your hand, and it was clearing. You looked at the others around you, and they looked healthier, too. You raised your hands in praise to God, for what God was doing through this man Jesus. And you turned to run back to your village. You went to the priest, as Jesus had instructed. He examined you, and gave you rites of purification, and pronounced you clean!

What a party they have for your homecoming! How good it feels to hug your mother, to hug your brothers, to hug your sisters, and for them to hug you back. You praise God daily, several times a day, for once you were an outsider, now you belong. Once you were far off from God, and now God had brought you back close. Then one day you see a Samaritan coming down the road, and you started to move to the other side. Then you see that it is Elihu. You glance around to be sure nobody is watching, and you embrace your friend, even though you knew that you would have to be purified again before you could worship the God of Israel. And Elihu tells you the rest of the story. He had started to run home as well, and realized that he had no Jewish priest to pronounce him clean. But it didn't matter, because clean he was! Since this rabbi was God's agent in making him whole again, he turned around to thank Jesus. He fell on the ground before Jesus, praising God at the top of his lungs! And Jesus said to his disciples, "Weren't ten healed? Where are the nine? Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?" Then Jesus said to Elihu, "Get up. Be on your way. Your faith has made you well." As Elihu tells his story, you feel a pang of guilt; of shame; of embarrassment. Every day you have been thankful for what Jesus had done. Every day, you have praised God for Jesus making you whole and well. Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe you should go looking for the one who healed you. Maybe you should go find Jesus. Maybe you can yet have the opportunity to say "Thank you." (pause)

Generally our own life stories aren't that dramatic, thank heavens. Maybe we haven't been a cleansed leper; or a prodigal child returning home; or a paralytic carried to Jesus by his friends; or a repentant thief hanging from a cross. Yet Jesus Christ has called you by name at your birth. His Spirit has been given to you at baptism. Jesus has touched you. Jesus has led you home. Jesus has forgiven you. Jesus has partied with you at your wedding and grieved with you at your times of loss. Jesus has healed your soul and saved you to eternal life. Give thanks to Jesus for his mercy, his love, his compassion.

We express thanks to Jesus, and to God, by coming to worship, to sing and to praise. We express thanks to Jesus, and to God, through our giving; so that others may find health and wholeness through the ministries of the church. Expressing thanks is what stewardship is all about. It's what makes a cheerful giver cheerful. We express thanks to Jesus, and to God, through our relationships and our daily lives, as God's love is revealed in the way that we treat others. We express thanks to Jesus, and to God, through our service, through helping others in need, the homeless and outcasts of our own day, by giving them help and mercy, rather than judgment and scorn. We express

thanks to Jesus, and to God, through our prayers. I invite you to be intentional this week about finding a way to say thank you to Jesus Christ; to say thank you to God. Do it through prayer, but also do it in action. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon