

Proper 23, St. Paul's

I want to tell you a story this morning. Written by an Episcopal Priest named Martin Bell, He wrote it in 1968 and it is in a little book titled "The way of the Wolf" And of course I have changed it some. O.K.?

This is a word or two on behalf of the nine who did not return to give thanks? The gospel reads something like this: there were ten lepers cleansed and one of them-just one of them-when he saw that he was healed, turned back praising God and prostrated himself at Jesus feet, giving him thanks.

And Jesus answering said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?"

Ten lepers were cleansed and one of them returned to give thanks. That is a nice thing to be able to do.

What about the others? It's simple, really. One of them was frightened-that's all. He didn't understand what had happened, and it frightened him. So he looked for some place to hide. Jesus scared him.

A second was offended because he had not been required to do something difficult before he could be healed. It was all too easy. He had expected months, maybe years, of fasting and prayer and washing and righteous living to be the requirement. But he had done none of this.

He had not earned his reward. His motto was "you get what you pay for." And so Jesus offended him with his free gift, called Grace.

The third had realized too late that he had not really wanted to be cleansed. That he did not know what to do or how to live or even who he was without his leprosy. Although it had been his fervent plea to be healed, he now began to see how much he had needed his leprosy and consequently how necessary it had been in defining him as a person. Jesus had taken away his identity.

It is difficult to explain the reason why the fourth leper did not return to give thanks. Perhaps because it is such a simple reason-and perhaps because we very nearly tread on holy ground even to talk about it. In a word, the fourth leper did not return because in his delirium of joy, he forgot. He forgot. That's all. He was so happy that he forgot.

The fifth leper was unable to say thank you any more to anybody. There is something that happens to a person who must beg in order to survive who is grudgingly thrown a few coins and with the coins receives a look filled with disgust and ridicule... and who is always-- expected to say thank you. He just doesn't say thank you any more to anybody-not even to Jesus.

The sixth leper was a woman--a mother who

had been separated from her family for eleven years because of the leprosy. She was now free to rejoin her husband and children. She did not return to give thanks because she was going where she belonged and where she had yearned to be for all those years. She was going home. Like a wild animal released from captivity, she had been freed by Jesus. And like the animal, she simply went straight home.

The seventh just didn't believe that Jesus had anything to do with the cleansing. He knew that healing had taken place, but why and how were the questions. Certainly he did not believe in hocus pocus, magic, miracles-any of that. There was a perfectly intelligible explanation of what had happened, but it didn't have anything to do with Jesus. He didn't return to give thanks because, in his mind, Jesus had nothing to do with the healing event.

The eighth leper did not return precisely because he did believe that his faith in Jesus had healed him-that the Kingdom of God was here. To return to give thanks when the Kingdom of God was breaking into his world, that made no sense at all. So he ran to tell others the good news.

What shall I say about the ninth leper? What was his experience? Why didn't he return? I don't know the answer to either of these questions. All I know is that he showed himself to the priest and immediately was cleansed. He then stood

still for a moment and smiled, The priest reports that the ninth leper gave two utterances. First he said, "So!" And then, "Ah, yes!"

Without another word he walked away. His eyes blazed fire but his shoulders sagged as if under a great burden. The air around him was silent. Then without warning he turned his head and fixed his eyes upon a rock by the side of the road. "Hah!" he said. And you can make of this what you will, but the priest says that the rock actually jumped a foot off the ground. The ninth leper then said, "So!" and "Ah, yes!" and disappeared from sight. It is impossible to say precisely why he did not return to give thanks.

Ten were cleansed and only one returned. It is nice to be able to do that. What shall I say now- that the real point is not that one returned but that ten were cleansed? You already know that.

What shall I say? That condemnation is easier than curiosity, investigation, getting to know somebody, finding out what makes them tick and that the reason they do what they do makes all the sense in the world given the circumstances of their life? You already know that.

What then shall I say? That it is good to give thanks? Yes. That it is understandable not to give thanks? Yes. That God does not heal the pains of this world and then stand around just waiting

for us to say thank you. No, God certainly doesn't. You already know that.

What then shall I say? That every one of us has at sometime in our life responded To God's healing loving cleansing and forgiving presence in our lives, the same way some of "The 10" have. I suspect that I have used them all at one time or another. Maybe you have too. You already know that.

But what of the nine? They are on the way home, hiding in fear, refusing to believe, offended at what they call cheap grace, so happy they forgot, lost without their leprosy, unable to say thank you ever again, publishing the news of the coming of the Kingdom-God, "who knows" where they are!

The point is this: God does. God knows where they are. First Jesus says to the leper who did return, "Arise, go thy way," and then he goes his own way, and his way is God's way.

This Jesus who is so close to God that he is the mirror of God, has a strange smile on his lips, But where are the nine? Don't you see it in his eyes? He knows where the nine are. He knew all along. Without another word Jesus walks away. Because his way is God's way, he has been with them all along.

His eyes blaze fire but his shoulders sag as if under a great burden. The air around

him is silent. Then without warning he turns his head and fixes his eyes upon a rock by the side of the road. "Hah!" he says. And you can make out of this what you will, but they say the rock actually jumped a foot off the ground. Jesus then said, "So!" and "Ah, yes!" And disappeared from sight.

What then shall I say? I will remind you that that response to God's love and kindness and confrontation and caring is also yours. I will tell you also that you have at one time or other in your life responded like that.

Not that you necessarily made a rock jump. But that you did something or said something or felt something or imagined something that changed the world, that made it better, richer fuller, safer even if only for a little time. But you already knew that.

What I want you to do is take some time to remember that time or those times, because there may have been many, And tell at least one other person, maybe more, your story. And it will have in it a "So" and an "Ah yes". Amen