

Sermon: To Be Seen

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Scriptures: Luke 17:11-9

October holds great excitement for many. We've got Halloween right around the corner and then it seems like a mad-dash toward Christmas and the New Year. As much as I love autumn, it's not just the proximity to the holidays and the change of weather that I enjoy (although as a Christmas fanatic, it doesn't hurt!). It's also that I get to celebrate a saint of the church, Francis of Assisi and, at the same time, see lots of adorable animals for our annual pet blessing. Francis is known as the patron saint of ecology because he believed in the inherent worth and dignity of all living creatures brought into being by a loving, merciful, just Creator. Many have heard lovely stories and legends about Francis's empathy, including the story about him and the wolf of Gubbio, which I told last year during the children's sermon. But Francis's interest and care didn't stop at the wild animal kingdom; he had a heart for alleviating human suffering as well and sought to ease it whenever possible.

Francis was not born a saint. Not in the Roman Catholic sense or in the sense we use in the UCC. Francis was born into relative comfort, and lived the kind of life you'd expect of a young man born into wealth and privilege. He delighted in the finest, brightest clothing money could buy, spent extravagantly, and lived the high-life. Somewhere along the way, however, Francis became disillusioned with this life of indulgence, gave up all the excesses his wealth offered him, and joined the military. It was on a pilgrimage to Rome that Francis became ill, which provoked within him a need to reflect on his life. A series of encounters with God eventually prompted him to give up all his worldly possessions, take a vow of genuine poverty, devote himself to the gospel, and give his life to those in greater need of love and care.

The legends about Francis of Assisi can and have filled volumes, but it is a story from Thomas of Celano in the *First Life of St. Francis* that I want to turn to today. All his life, Francis had a fear and revulsion of lepers, avoiding them at all costs. Francis wrote in

his *Testament*, “When I was in sins, it seemed extremely bitter to me to look at lepers.” In the vanity of his youth, the mere thought of becoming like one of “them” caused him to hold his nose with his hands even at the mere sight of a leper colony. So uncomfortable was he by leprosy, that the very thought of them made him nauseated. One day, Francis stumbled across a leper as he rode his horse on a road near the town of Assisi. This happened before Francis had taken any religious vows, but sometime after the Spirit had begun to work within him. As he looked upon the poor suffering man, something within him compelled him to step down from his horse and embrace the leper. And that’s not all, he actually went so far as to kiss him. Quite a leap for a man who couldn’t stand the thought of being in the same town as a leper, let alone pass by one on the roadside.

Francis wasn’t a man accustomed to going out of his comfort zone and into the margins, but the gospels tell us of a number of instances when Jesus went to the margins of the society to serve, love, and heal those whom others would rather not think about. To a greater extent than we do today, people in the first century Roman Empire tended to stay away from those who were unwell. Primarily, this had to do with ritual impurity—those who were sick were thought to be unclean and lepers, especially, received the brunt of this stigmatization. Francis’s discomfort with the lepers of the 12th century wasn’t out of the norm. Francis was acting very much in accordance with others in his community who would rather stay away. Jesus, however, defied all cultural norms of first century Rome in his life and ministry going purposely toward the untouchables, onward always into the spaces deemed unsafe by respectable people.

In our gospel story today from Luke, Jesus is traveling in the region between Samaria and Galilee as he made his way to Jerusalem. This would have been an “in-between” space in this area; this place was the very margins to which the untouchables had been sent by the wider society and religious establishment. Lepers in this time were not necessarily those diagnosed with actual leprosy, but could have suffered from any number of visible skin diseases. They lived together in community and made their way in the world primarily by begging from those more fortunate. Typically, lepers would

have yelled out from the literal margins petitioning for morsels of food or declaring their unclean status, as was required by law. On the day Jesus passes through this marginal space, however, ten lepers call out for something much greater; they plea for mercy. They cry out begging to be seen so that they might be healed and therefore freed from their misery and oppression.

Even if a leper were healed from their disease, it was only the temple priests who could declare them clean, so Jesus tells them to go to the temple. "As they went," the text reads, "they were made clean." It is at this moment of healing that one of them turns back, praising God for this miracle he has just experienced. He bowed down then at Jesus's feet, thanking him profusely for the gift of health and the ability to return to ordered, respectable society. It was in this moment that Jesus realizes something: he's a Samaritan.

You may recall, of course, that Samaritans and Jews were not friends, though they had a shared history. The Samaritans were Jews of the Northern Kingdom, but by the time of Jesus, an extreme hatred had developed between them and their Southern Kingdom equivalents. These two groups did not get along. The man prostrating himself at the feet of Jesus, then, was on the outside of the outside. The most marginalized of the marginalized in that time and place. Unloved. Unseen.

And yet here was this Rabbi who looked upon him and actually saw him. Jesus made him feel seen. Jesus made him feel worthy of healing. Worthy returning from the untouched margins and back into the blessed center. Jesus was able to see in him the very thing God sees in all of us regardless of who we are: a beloved individual of equal worth and dignity to every other created being.

Francis kissing the leper was out of character for him. His revulsion of people with skin diseases was such that there's no reason he should have been moved to offer him a second glance, much less a kiss. It was something deep within him that compelled him to step from his horse and embrace a man who prior to this moment would have sent

him running for the hills. In that moment, Francis saw that this suffering man from the margins was a human being: a beloved child of God. He kissed him to show his affection for a fellow image bearer of the divine creator.

But their encounter didn't end with Francis's kiss. He didn't simply climb upon his horse's back and make his way home. He couldn't stop there, because moments later the leper held his hand out to Francis hoping he might offer him something to help ease his suffering. He reached out to Francis for mercy in much the same way the ten lepers called out to Jesus. Francis gave him all the money he had and only then moved to mount his horse and continue on his way. Except, when he turned back to the place where the leper had been standing, the man was gone. He looked around him to see if the man had moved, but there was no man to be found. He had vanished. But how could it be? How could a man who was standing right there one instant be gone the next? It was in that moment, that Francis realized it wasn't a leper at all that he had encountered, but Jesus, himself, upon whose cheeks he had placed that kiss. Jesus, himself, to whom Francis had shown kindness and mercy. Jesus, himself, who sought to reveal himself in this nameless suffering soul. It was as if the words of Matthew 25 leapt from the page and into the life of this gentle man in the 12th century, "as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me."

From that moment on, Francis's convictions grew stronger and stronger, as he reflected on the divine Spirit working its will within him. This was a profound moment of transformation, but not just in the obvious way. For wasn't just the leper who was transformed in that moment, but also Francis, whose life was profoundly changed by the experience.

Francis himself wrote, "When I was in sins, it seemed extremely bitter to me to look at lepers, and the Lord himself led me among them and I practiced mercy with them." Francis resolved then and there, "never in the future to refuse any one, if at all possible, who asked for the love of God." We can take a page from Francis's book here and from the life of Jesus. Francis did not look upon the leper and hem and haw over whether the

man was worthy of his mercy just like Jesus did not debate the value of a single one of the ten before healing them. Neither man asked whether the lepers really deserved it. They do not investigate their background to determine how great their need was. They did not ask to see a doctor's note explaining their physical health or a financial statement declaring them destitute. They saw beloved children of God in need and resolved to do what they could to ease it. Full stop. For people who are suffering or on the margins, the gift of being seen is powerful. It is fundamental to well-being. Isolation isn't good for the mind and it is destructive to the soul. To be seen is a vital component of our self-worth and makes life with worth living. If we can give that simple gift to person who is hurting, why wouldn't we?

Scripture tells us there is nothing we can do to earn God's love or God's grace. These are freely given by our creator to each and every one of us. There's no litmus test, there's no hierarchy, there's no list that declares who does and does not deserve the love of our Lord. It's not God who puts out those tests of worth. It's not God who raises up some to the exclusion of others. And it's not God who makes lists and draws lines to separate people. And if God's not doing that, why on earth would we?

Amen.