

A Fuller Vision

Luke 17:11-21

Sermon by Dan Schrock

October 13, 2013

"On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

²⁰Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." (NRSV)

In high school I didn't know much about trees. I was around them all the time but I didn't understand them. We lived on a farm in those days, with maple, catalpa, an ash trees growing around our house. I saw them every day. I admired their stately trunks and glorious leaves, their ability to withstand severe storms and cold winters, and still grow again the following spring. While I admired them, I didn't understand how their inner processes work.

Then in college I took a botany class. I studied extra hard for that course because the sciences aren't my strongest area. We learned the details of cell growth and division, photosynthesis, the Krebs cycle, and so on.

Then one day late in the semester all these details came together for me. While sitting at my desk I had a vision, a comprehensive mental image, of all the informal processes that make a tree function. I saw a whole tree from the delicate roots in the soil, through the vessels in the trunk, and out the branches into the leaves. This wasn't a static tree, but a living, working, breathing organism. I saw the cells passing chemicals across their membranes, the phloem and xylem pulsating nutrients up and down and across the tree, the leaves engaging in photosynthesis, the ends of the roots and the tips of the branches pushing out new growth. I grasped all of this at once, in a moment, in the

twinkling of an eye—and I was dazzled. All the hard studying paid off and I finally understood trees at a deeper level, in a more comprehensive way than ever before.

Something similar happens to the tenth leper in today’s story from Luke. He and his nine fellow lepers form a small community of alienation on the fringe of society. To them, the kingdom of God seems far away, and part of it is their social location. Luke specifies that these ten lepers lived on the border between Galilee and Samaria, in a place not quite Jewish, not quite Samaritan. They have diseased skin which physically makes their bodies ritually unclean, not fit to mingle with better people like Pharisees and Sadducees. They can’t shop in markets with other people, can’t live in the same house with other people, can’t go to synagogue with other people. They’re pushed off to the fringe of society to scrape by as best they can.

There on the borderland it seems to these ten lepers that the kingdom of God is very far away. God’s kingdom, if and when it came, would surely come to people in the big cities like Jerusalem and Caesarea, not to castoff people like them. God’s saving power was not for them. After all, did not the law of Leviticus say in the clearest possible terms that people with chronically diseased skin has to live by themselves far away from everyone else (Lev 13:46)? God’s own laws had pushed them to the fringe of society!

When they saw Jesus enter their borderland, they know what they have to do. They have to keep their physical distance so Jesus and his companions wouldn’t become unclean too. Yet they were not about to let physical distance stop them from asking for help: “Jesus, have mercy on us!”

Note their request. It’s a prayer without specifics. So many of our prayers are full of specific, detailed requests: “Please God, do a, b, and c for me by tomorrow and fix problem d over here within the next month.” There’s none of that here. The lepers pray a simple, open-ended plea for mercy without telling Jesus what to do, how to do it, or when to do it. “Have mercy, Jesus!” That’s all. Nothing more.

Luke says this is when Jesus “saw” them (v. 14). Greek has a number of different words for seeing, and this one, *eidō*, means perceptive seeing. It’s the act of seeing below

the surface of things in order to apprehend a deeper reality. It's like looking at a tree and seeing the inner processes that make a tree work. It means looking at a person and seeing the emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual realities that this person lives with under the surface. It means looking at a group of people and perceiving the underlying desires and motives and dreams.

This is the kind of perceptive seeing that Jesus used in many situations, including this one. Jesus quickly grasps what the lepers really want. They want their disease to disappear; they want to become ritually pure; they want to leave their dreary lives on the border and live once again in villages and cities with family and friends.

Jesus does indeed have mercy, for mercy is one of his specialties. "Go and show yourselves to the priests," he calls out to them. They go, and as they go they are healed. The disease disappears! Their skin becomes whole and fresh! Their deepest dreams become real!

One of them, a Samaritan, looks at himself. The Greek verb is *eidō*, the same one used to describe Jesus' looking just a moment earlier. Yes, the Samaritan man sees the surface of his skin—now a lovely shade of brown without any of that nasty white disease. (!) But he sees more. He looks below the brown surface of his skin and perceives that at a fundamental level he is healed!

In verse 15, Luke doesn't specify what sort of healing the man is looking at in the deep place of his life. However, in verses 20 and 21 Luke gives us a clue. In those verses Jesus says:

The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed.

The Greek verb here is different than the one we were just talking about. The verb here refers to the kind of looking that casual observers do who are lazy in their looking and who have no intention of making any kind of commitment.¹ They can't perceive the kingdom of God because they aren't looking carefully.

In verse 21, Jesus goes on to say that

In fact [behold], the kingdom of God is within you.²

The Greek word here for “behold” comes from the same verb *eidō* which indicates the deep perception both Jesus and the Samaritan man are engaging in. The clue, then, is this: it would seem that when the Samaritan man looks below the surface of his life, he perceives that the kingdom of God has now come within him. His skin was healed, yes, but the deeper healing is receiving the kingdom of God in his own body, at the heart of his life. Healing isn’t a superficial matter; it reaches to the roots of your life.

This glorious realization that the kingdom is now inside of him is what causes the man to turn around, fall prostrate at Jesus’ feet in an act of worship, and praise God in a loud voice. Seeing the deeper realities of God leads the man to glorify God. This foreigner to the house of Israel comes to worship Jesus Christ. He is indeed saved and blessed.

Perhaps you too would like to peer below superficial things to apprehend the deeper reality of God’s kingdom. How do we do this? I suggest three steps.

First, slow down. Generally speaking, the kingdom of God becomes more noticeable when we back off of living at breakneck speeds. Take moments to pause from the usual, to sit instead of run, to look away from the computer into the faces of your fellow human beings and the faces of creation. I couldn’t see the deeper workings of a tree until I slowed down long enough to read that botany text and really dig into the details.

Second, notice. When something wonderful happens to you, notice it. Pay attention to it. When the Samaritan leper paused to gaze in wonder at his new skin, he noticed something else stirring below his skin. He noticed a subtle shift in his mind; he noticed a sea change in his heart; he noticed the gentle yet powerful breath of God’s own Holy Spirit which always precedes the arrival of God’s kingdom.

Third, reflect. Reflect on what you’ve just noticed. The kind of reflection we’re talking about here is more about using your loving attention than using rigorous logic. Loving attention is about holding things gently and respectfully. It’s what Mary did after the angel visited her in Luke 1: she pondered these things in her heart (1:29, cf. 1:66). “Reflecting with loving attention” and “pondering in your heart” are much the same thing.

For both Mary and the Samaritan leper, heartfelt pondering allowed them to perceive the new life of God's kingdom growing inside them.

In the story of Jesus and the Samaritan leper, Luke invites us to slow down, notice, and reflect on the marvelous reality of God at work in the depths of our lives, saving us, healing us, making us whole. So go ahead. Look!

¹ Dennis Hamm, "What the Samaritan Leper Sees: The Narrative Christology of Luke 17:11-19," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994), 285-286.

² The Greek text contains the word *idou*, which the NRSV translators inexplicably have not rendered into the English "behold."