

Turning Back  
The last sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church,  
Edmonton, Alberta  
by Carol Penner  
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Luke 17:11-21

I was talking to a friend that I was going to be preaching my last sermon, and I was wondering what to preach about, and she suggested I title this sermon, "Everything I forgot to tell you." But that would take too long...

So instead I am preaching some good news from a bible story that I've known my whole life. It's one of the earliest bible stories I remember learning. For me, it's associated with a song that we learned in Sunday school, a Medical Missionaries song, "Ten Lepers". [listen to the song]

I think that this story has a lot more to offer us than just a trip down memory lane. What's striking about this story is that a group of people are healed. Jesus is usually in the business of healing individuals. There is one story where two blind men are healed, but this is the only story where more than two people are healed all at the same time. The men are called lepers...in that time anyone with a skin condition was called a leper, and they were cast out from society. They were not allowed to come in physical contact with healthy people, which is why the story says the lepers kept their distance. They were the cast off and the cast out. And it was these cast off and cast out people who ask Jesus to have mercy on them, to heal them.

Now leprosy at that time could not be cured, but other skin ailments did sometimes clear up. So there was a protocol for what one could do if the skin condition ended: it was your duty to show yourself to the priest to be declared clean, and then you were allowed to re-enter society.

Jesus tells these men, simply, to go and show themselves to the priests. He tells them to do their duty, as if they were healed.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for these men with Jesus telling them to go see the priest, as if they were healed? They look down and see their bandages; they see their diseased skin, their disfigured limbs. Why should they go to tell the priest that they are cured? They could have said, "That would be a wasted trip Jesus, look at me, I'm sick!" But the thing is with these men, they had absolutely nothing to lose. They were at the lowest point that a person from that society could go. They would try anything. So they do what Jesus tells them, and dutifully set out towards the priest's house.

And it is on the way, on the journey, that they realize that they have been healed. We can only imagine the moment of transformation. You can imagine the animation that must have filled their steps as they hurried to see the priest.

It's an amazing story too because the men don't have to do very much, they just have to head in the direction of healing. They don't have to lie, saying, "I'm healed," when they aren't. They don't have to declare Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, they don't have to believe in a long list of doctrinal beliefs. All they have to do is move one foot after the other in a certain direction.

I want to stop here and think about this story in terms of our own lives. How are we like those ten people with leprosy? Are we at our lowest place in some way? Is there nowhere to go but up? We can think about this on an individual level, and as human beings gathered in groups, where are we broken together?

I remember a time like that for me, an area of my life that was very broken... it was in my relationship with my stepmother. My stepmother entered my life when I was eight years old, and I certainly give her credit for taking on the big task of marrying my dad, who had three girls aged 8, 10, and 12. I was the youngest. Being a step-parent was a not a role that she took a shine too, and we lived in a house that was filled with conflict. My older sisters moved out as soon as they could manage it. Shortly after that my father got sick and died.

As I lived alone with my stepmother in the years after my father's death, our relationship deteriorated too. I found her terribly hard to get along with. When I finally left for college in Winnipeg, we hardly kept in contact, only a couple of times a year.

Now it's not just that we didn't get along when we saw each other, there was something about my relationship with my mom that deeply disturbed me, that rattled me, I needed weeks to recover from seeing her. Maybe you have someone in your life like that.

It was so bad that when I was married and we eventually moved back to Ontario, I was so anxious about being in the same province as her, that I went into counseling to try to figure out what was going on in my head.

I did still see her a couple of times a year...and things did not get better. It got so bad, that in consultation with my pastor, there was a period of two years where I just didn't see her at all. It was just too unhealthy for me. Around that time I had a recurring nightmare where I had murdered my mother and in the dream I was very worried that people would find out I had buried her in my backyard. I don't think you need a degree in psychology to interpret that dream!

I am telling you all this for a reason, to set the stage for really how bad our relationship was, it wasn't that we just annoyed each other. There was a lot of brokenness there.

After that two year break, we resumed contact, but I can't say our relationship was much healthier, I think we brought out the worst in each other. Now my mom had no other living relatives who had any contact with her. And as she got older, I had this big fear that she would be disabled in some way and I would be the one who had to take care of her. I didn't know how I would handle that.

And sure enough a decade later my fears came true, she had some serious health problems and I had to take care of things as she transitioned from her home to a nursing home, seeing her all time for several years. Now the thing was, I felt I had to do it, because there simply was no one else around to take care of her. It was my duty, I knew it was the road I was called to walk.

And somewhere along the way of taking care of her for the eight years before she died, my relationship with my mother was healed. There was no shining moment where suddenly everything was fine, or a moment where we asked each other for forgiveness for the way we'd hurt each other. We didn't talk much about the past. Maybe that was the key to going forward. Gradually, over the years, day by day, we came to terms with each other. On both sides. She came to accept me, and I came to accept her. It was a long journey, and the healing didn't happen at the beginning of it. But there we were, able to enjoy each other's company at long, long last.

Maybe you can think of a situation like that, a healing that took place over time. Maybe you have a relationship like that. Or you have experienced a physical healing, a condition that you didn't think you would get rid of, but it was healed. Or an addiction or obsession of some kind, that gradually eases as you take steps towards normalcy. Those are individual problems being healed.

Or maybe you witnessed healing, but it's taken place in a group of people, a change in a country. Canada excluded people from entering our country because of the colour of their skin, or we excluded people from human rights because of their sexual orientation. Along the way, there is healing. I think of Colombia with its civil war. The war there has been going on since 1966. Fifty years, almost my whole lifetime! Maybe you heard about it in the news, they have just signed a ceasefire agreement. Justice or mercy where once there was not justice or mercy. Healing happening along the way.

What happens next? In our story 90% of the people just keep going on their way. But one of the people with leprosy, turns back and with a loud voice starts praising God. "...one returned to give God thanks" This person comes back to Jesus, falling at his feet and thanking him. And this one was a Samaritan. Jesus wonders where the other nine were, because were not ten made clean? Then he says, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well."

Your faith has made you well... The story says that all of the men were healed, but Jesus uses a different word to describe the condition of the man who turned back to say thank you. He uses a word that literally means saved...the man was cured, he was made whole, made complete. It was in giving thanks to God that the man who turned back was saved.

Thankfulness is what saves him. Thankfulness to God, who set him on that healing journey. The other nine are still healed, and are probably pretty happy. But they don't say thank you to Jesus.

What were the nine thinking? Maybe they thought of themselves as people who beat the odds. Some percentage of people were healed of their skin conditions, otherwise there would not have been the rule that people should show themselves to the priest. Or maybe they could have patted themselves on the back thinking, it sure is good that I went to show myself to the priest. Only one turns back to Jesus, falling on his knees in thanksgiving.

What about us? I could very easily chalk up the healing of my mother's relationship to my own persistence, or to the effects of aging on both of us. Finally we both mellowed out. That's a relief. Or I could chalk it up to my great prayer life...except I know that's not true. I did pray about my relationship with my mom, for the first ten years...but when nothing changes you start to lose hope, and I confess I didn't pray about it hardly at all for decades.

But what happens if I turn back, and stop and say, "Where is God's hand in this story?" Can I see God working in me, working in her, in imperceptible ways? Can I wonder why I was given the opportunity to care for her? Was that all part of God working for healing in my life, in her life? Turning back and looking for God, I realize that plain and simple, it's a miracle. And do I stop then and fall on my knees and thank God for what I see? If I do that, something else happens, somehow healing, wholeness, salvation comes to me.

I think very often, 90% of the time at least, when healing things happen, we chalk it up to our own efforts or to chance. That addiction that faded away, that compulsion to look at pornography on the internet, that compulsion to drink, that obsession with someone who is not your partner...we finally reach a place where it no longer torments us. We turn back and ask ourselves, "How did that healing happen?" We take all the credit, "I have a lot of willpower!" we say, or maybe we say "my circumstances changed" or "I grew out of it." Can we turn back and see God working slowly, incrementally, creating the conditions for freedom so that finally at long last it blossoms? Freedom blossoming where once there was only chains! Can we fall on our knees?

Or peace comes to Colombia, at long last, the FARC guerillas sign a truce. I was part of a church that sponsored a refugee family from Colombia. Over the years five

million people were displaced because of that war, and we sponsored four of those displaced people. They fled because their family members were murdered by FARC, they received death threats themselves. They had to go into hiding for two years never staying in one place, until finally their refugee claim was processed and they could come to Canada. I think of that family now, and what it means for them to see their country officially not at war any more. We can read about a truce being signed in the newspaper, and ho hum, another war ended, that's what happens with wars, they eventually end. Or do we turn back and see God working slowly, incrementally, creating the conditions for peace so that finally at long last it blossoms. Peace blossoming where once there was terror and destruction! Can we fall on our knees? Do we have a litany of thankfulness?

There is an alternative, and it's not pretty. I know in my own life, too often I have turned back and had only a litany of grievances. I can get stuck in the past, and instead of concentrating on the healing, I still think about the brokenness. For years if anybody asked, I could list, and did list all of the hurtful things my mom did, that I had to live through. Of course I would never list the hurtful things I did that she had to live through. I know that litany of grievances by heart, I spent a lot of decades reciting it. And then the healing happens. I could register that, yes, healing happened, but I could still continue on with my litany of grievances. Can I turn back and start a new litany of thankfulness?

I think there is place for turning back and naming what happened, naming the hurts we've experienced. But once healing has happened, I think the litany in our hearts has to be one of thankfulness, or we will not fully receive the gift of salvation. The lepers couldn't for the rest of their lives keep saying, "Do you know how horrible it is to have leprosy?" Or they could continually talk about this person that excluded me, and that person that excluded me, and how awful it was to be excluded. 90% of people might do that. But one of the ten returned to give God thanks, and was saved.

Lendrum MB is a community of people in Edmonton that is a place of healing for people. People have heard the good news about Jesus Christ here, they have been saved. Their lives have been turned around. This house has been a house of worship, a place where we have heard stories of healing, we have heard beautiful songs of praise. People who did not have a family, have found family here, the family of God. They have become part of a group working to bring healing and hope to our city, our world. We do that in small ways, in incremental ways. We teach each other a litany of thankfulness here, and we say it together.

Has there been brokenness here? Yes, there has, even in the community of faith. We grieve together as death hits home here, we suffer together through sickness, through financial hard times. People have been hurt even in our community life together, and some of those wounds are deep and aren't healed yet. Some people have left under bad circumstances. Other people haven't felt welcomed and have stayed away. In some ways we are still waiting for healing. Here today, we are still like the ten lepers on the road calling out to Jesus, to heal them.

What does Jesus say to us? I think Jesus is still staying, get on the road, walk toward that place of healing. You look down, and say, it's still broken! But are we willing to keep going, to move in the direction of healing, putting our feet one after the other, showing up, being part of a community, even when it is not perfect?

I am entirely convinced that Jesus has healed us, is healing us and will heal us. And we are saved together, as we thank God for miracles of healing.

This week I encourage you to be like the Samaritan in this story, and give thanks for a way that God has healed you, or healed us. And do this not just in your silent prayers to God, but say it out loud to someone you know, someone that God will bring into your life, say what it is you are thankful for. Talk about how God has healed you, how God is healing you, is healing us.

It's been a puzzle to me why God called me here, only to call me away so soon, I am grieving the loss of ministry here, and having to leave this wonderful community when I have just gotten settled. But I am trusting that this has been a step on the way in a healing journey, in ways that I don't even understand completely. As I turn back, I am filled with thankfulness for having met such faithful loving people along the way. My life has changed listening to the thankful stories I have heard here, stories of God's grace. I am thankful too that as Christians we believe that our paths never part for good, but only for a time, and that we will be together again, giving thanks at the throne of God.