

Showing Some Skin to Say ‘Thank You’ [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 17:11—19

Today’s sermon is NOT about saying ‘Thank You...’ Of course, it would be convenient if it were. We might want it to be. I might want it to be, and you might selectively hear what I’m about to say about today’s passage from Luke 17:11—19; and you might reduce it—you might boil it down to something your grandmother might have prompted you to do: *Say ‘Thank You.’* But, despite the convenience and the civility of that polite remark, this morning there’s an itch that needs scratching and a scratch that needs healing.

We’re talking today about *SKIN*—about showing skin—about having skin in the game—about being comfortable or uncomfortable in our own skin. And, you see, the reason I’m calling out the largest organ in the human body is the fact that we’re vulnerable. Our skin is vulnerable. Our skin can be both caressed and cut. Our skin can be touched appropriately by those we’ve learned to trust. Our skin can also be violated or trespassed upon by those we’ve learned not to trust. Skin equals vulnerability and relationship. And so, there is eczema, and there is erotic love. There are pimples, and there are goose bumps. There are boils and blisters. But there are also blushes... and expressions of beauty that will never be captured in a painting, in a sculpture, in a photograph or on the computer screen. We’re not talking today about just saying ‘thank you’—we’re talking about making some skin available—presenting it in the process—and what’s so inconvenient about that comes to fruition like this:

“On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’”

A few weeks ago, someone approached me after worship and said he enjoyed the service but at times he was distracted. And when I asked him what was so distracting, he asked me what happened to my finger. I then told him the whole story, which I'll be glad to tell you. But my point is—his first reaction was to notice an abnormality or a disfigurement. And I wonder about that. I wonder about the inconvenience of having nine fingers (and not ten), and how awkward it is when the cashier hands me my change and the quarters, nickels and dimes fall through. But, as I'm aspiring to speak about spiritual things to spiritual people, in the name of the Spirit of Christ—it's really, really inconvenient to be bound up in this skin.

In the film, *Father Stu*, a Catholic priest almost doesn't become a priest because the effect of a muscular disorder on the way he walks and talks and flails his arms. The Monseigneur even worries about him spilling the Blood of Christ when he holds the communion chalice. And my favorite line from the story is when Father Stu says, "We shouldn't pray to have an easy life, but for the strength to endure a difficult one." In other words: DIS-EASE.

And, similarly, in Luke 17, Jesus ventures into a border-region where there is DIS-EASE. Not only are certain persons sequestered and isolated there because of their leprous contagion affecting their skin—they are also trying to negotiate an ancient trauma, which is this centuries-old grudge between the Samaritans to the north of Israel and the Judeans to the south. Evidently, those religious and political animosities have been placed on the back-burner... Evidently, health-care for the skin of both parties has become the top priority. But that's where Jesus meets them, doing the desperate work of a dermatologist from a distance—on the way to Jerusalem.

And before we review how Jesus responds to this collective cry for help—let’s also remember what’s going to happen in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, the man here referred to as ‘*Master*’ is going to have his flesh butchered like a common slave. He’s going to have the skin on his hands, forearms and feet punctured. He’s going to have his side pierced. His torso is going to be mutilated in a torturous flogging. And across his forehead, the skin is going to be pricked by a crown of thorns as a mockery. It’s going to be quite a spectacle. But before any of that trauma is inflicted, he tells 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 lepers to follow the protocol of the Book of Leviticus: “*Go and show yourselves to the priests*”—go and submit your skin to examination.

Now, I don’t mind telling you that I’m a little embarrassed. Once upon a time, I was preaching a sermon, and in the very last pew an 80-year-old man was having a heart attack. He slumped down in his seat, nuzzled his head on his wife’s shoulder; and we had to stop the service and call the paramedics. Another time we had this young family light the Advent candles, and the young son was wearing this wood sweater and leaning over the flame, he caught on fire. Another time I had to take a break and change a baby’s diaper before breaking the bread for communion. I’m embarrassed our bodies, our flesh, our blood, our bones, our internal organs always seem to get in the way of some great spiritual epiphany. And it’s never seems to happen in a very convenient way. You see, what I want to happen in this miracle story is for Jesus to heal this skin disease instantaneously—*Whamo!* And what I want all the healed human beings to do is show a little damned gratitude. I want them to get down on their healthy knees and thank him on the spot. But for Jesus to make them jump through all these hoops—all this rigamarole—well, it’s embarrassing for public relations, and it’s inconvenient.

In Walker Percy's novel, *The Second Coming*, a woman has escaped from an institution for the mentally ill. Her name is Allison, and what she does to sneak off the grounds is to hide herself in the laundry truck. Then, when the truck stops by the park in the middle of the city, she gets out and tries to imitate all the so-called normal people she can see. Allison is doing exactly this, however, when she's approached by an bright, sun-shiny lady with a winning smile. And yet, what's strange is that, as this well-polished woman passes out these brochures from the satchel bag she's carrying, nearly everyone tries to avoid her. It's an outreach program for church, but Allison, an escapee from the psychiatric unit, doesn't know any better. She takes the brochure, which says something about making a new start, and begins to read. And this is how she shows her skin:

"Yes, there's a sense in which I would like to make a new start."

"Are you alone? Do you feel lonely?"

"I am alone. But I don't feel lonely."

"Why don't you come to a little get-together we having tonight. I have a feeling a person like yourself might get a lot out of it."

"I'm not sure what you mean by the expression, 'a person like yourself.' Does that mean you know what I am like?"

And so, what about us, here at Northwood Presbyterian? Do you know what I'm like? Do I know what you're like? Isn't this interaction—this healing—going to take time? And isn't what we do in worship every Sunday, and what I challenge you to do as interim pastor, a little inconvenient. Let's face it. I will admit to you. The faith of Jesus Christ does not work in efficient and spiritually-succinct ways. Just as God became enfleshed in the dark epidermis of a Palestinian Jew, we need to show our skin. And then, guess what?

Every once in a while, someone will take in the long view of their *DIS-EASED* life-journey, and they'll allow themselves to be amazed at the various healings along the way. And every once in a while—and this happens sometimes at church—they won't just say 'Thank you' and get back to business-as-usual. Every once in a while—maybe one in ten times—they'll re-arrange their convenient schedules around the inconvenience of God's enfleshed mercy in Christ. That is to say, instead of hiding in plain sight, they'll do what the Samaritan does in Luke 17, when he prostrates himself at Jesus' feet.

Of course, this wasn't the first time that a skin-disease had been miraculously healed. In Second Kings, chapter five, we learn about a Syrian general, whose wife is served by a slave girl from Israel. The girl tells the highly decorated officer about a prophet from back in her homeland—and how Elisha is in the habit of doing these amazing things. General Naaman sends a letter to the king of Israel, who thinks it's a trick and tears his clothes. Elisha, however, welcomes the foreigner and invites him to submerge his diseased body seven times in the Jordan River. Reluctantly at first, and a little indignant, the general does the inconvenient thing and verse 14 says. his flesh is restored to that of a little baby boy... But here's the glitch. In verse 15 Naaman wants to express his thanks by offering a present (and unfortunately that's where today's reading ended). What I'd like to point out, however, is how that expression of perfunctory appreciation is rejected in verse 16. ***“As the Lord lives,”*** says the prophet Elisha, ***“I will accept nothing!”*** In other words, 'Don't you get what's happening here? This isn't just business-as-usual.'

Tom Long tells the story of he and his wife joining a church in Atlanta, and how before they made their membership official, the pastor asked all ten persons in the class why they felt so inclined. The Long's said something about the youth program and the adequate parking on Sunday morning. Other couples chimed in and referred to the music program. Others appreciated the good preaching and teaching. But then, turning to a man with a scruffy beard and some scraggly hair, pulled back in a pony tail, everyone in the New Members Class heard him say this: "I'm joining this church because it saved my life." He then went on to describe his addictions to drugs and alcohol, his abusive parents, his failed marriage, his run-ins with the law... and finally, how this one deacon of the church had taken the time and the energy to really be there for him; I mean, physically be there. And so, 'I'm joining this church because it saved my life.' 'Okay, that's fine. But the rest of us are thankful for the ample parking, for the music program and for the preaching and teaching. The rest of us are here because we get something out of it.'

And all of them had their baptisms renewed and they joined. Months later, however, Randy had sort of disappeared. No one had seen him. And word came that he was in prison. Feeling badly, Tom Long then took the time to go to that prison, and as he sat down and talked with him through a pane of glass, Randy told him everything—how, after joining the church, he remembered that there was a warrant for his arrest in DeKalb County; and he prayed about it and turned himself in. Tom Long then asked if he needed any help—any legal help, you know, to get out. And Randy replied with a big grin on his face; he said, "Well, I've got a great ministry going on. We meet for Bible Study. We pray for one another. And Jesus! I'm so thankful."