

Faith-enol

Luke 17:11-19

October 13, 2019

“Cleanliness is next to godliness.” We’re all raised on this phrase, and it’s drilled into us, especially around the holidays (which are fast approaching). For Christmas, Thanksgiving, other such holidays, we spend quite a bit of time cleaning up the house for our much-awaited guests. Every pot, pan, plate, and fork is cleaned, whether by hand or by machine. The tablecloths, if they’re dusty, are washed. Napkins are neatly folded with all silverware and eatery properly set on the tables. All floors are swept and mopped. The bathrooms are cleaned from top to bottom and the carpets are vacuumed. At least with my family, this is the case, and last Christmas, when Katie and I were home, we got roped into helping my parents prepare for the party. There was so much cleaning involved that Katie and I were both frustrated with my parents and, at least in the moment, wouldn’t have said everything was going well. You can bet though that the house was spotless, at least until Fisher started rolling around on all the carpets, covering them yet again in his hair, and drooling on the floor because he smelled all the good food. At that point though, Katie and I were both tired of all the cleaning and meticulous labor that went into making the party possible. So, we said, “To heck with it,” though probably with more colorful language. In the end, even if the house wasn’t 100% clean, the holiday went well and all was well with us as a result. This brings us to a curious thought also raised by the reading today: you can be well and not clean, or clean and not well. The two do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, much like today’s reading.

At this point, Jesus has just finished talking to his disciples about how having faith the size of a mustard seed can allow a person to command a tree to uproot itself and replant itself in the sea. So, the fact that we have an occurrence of Jesus saying, “Your faith has made you well,” to someone immediately following this is no coincidence. This story is a demonstration of the power of faith. What’s even more critical to note though is who has the faith in this story: it’s a Samaritan with leprosy. A Samaritan was an outsider, and those with leprosy were outsiders. Therefore, this man is a walking example of marginalization, but yet, he has faith, faith enough to make him not just clean (like the other nine lepers), but “well,” a difference we’ll get to in a second. What’s probably more important though is that this is yet another example of the love of God reaching farther than otherwise expected. Not only does it reach beyond the barrier of “clean v. unclean,” but it reaches beyond racial and cultural barriers as well, as if to say that no one is outside the reach of God’s love and no one is beyond healing. However, this can make us ask what is required to be healed: is it being “clean” or is it being “well,” and what is the difference between the two?

“Cleanliness,” by definition is “the state of being free of dirt or any other foreign or extraneous matter; free from irregularity or flaw.” In other words, the skin of the ten men was clean. It wasn’t dirty or irregular. However, what needs to be understood about their “irregular” skin condition is that they may very well have not been sick at all. “Leprosy” was something of an umbrella term that covered a whole variety of skin conditions. It could have been something contagious like a pox or Measles, something where they very well could have spread it to family, friends, neighbors, and started an epidemic. However, it also covered non-contagious appearances like freckles, moles, and rashes, things that are the farthest from being a contagion.

So, we need to keep in mind that these “lepers” may not all have been “dirty” and in need of cleaning. The only cleanliness they may have needed was a declaration of “ritual cleanliness” from a priest after a purification ritual was performed.

“Wellness” though, by definition, means “the state of being in good health; sound in body and mind.” So, wellness goes deeper. “To be clean” is a physical cure. Presumably everyone here showers or takes a bath once a week, though the spaces between some people out there might say otherwise. Seriously though, in so doing, you are clean. All the dirt and oils accumulated over a given period of time is washed away. However, you can be sick as a dog but still take a shower. “Cleanliness” does not dictate “wellness.” Wellness goes deeper, to the mind and the spirit. For Jesus to tell this man that his faith has made him well, this is almost to say that this man’s soul, his mind and spirit, as well as his outward appearance, is spotless.

What’s more, another key part to the “how” is the language Jesus uses, as the words he chooses are actually very particular and definitely well-worth noting. For example, the phrase “made well” is translated different ways depending on the version of the Bible you are looking at. Some actually translate it as “healed” while others translate it as “saved.” So, this “wellness” goes beyond just being of sound body, mind, and spirit. This digs into the very question of salvation. The faith of the Samaritan, the one man who turned back, has saved him. Also though, Jesus tells this man to “Get up.” The word used here is the same one used for “resurrection.” Yet again, we have a greater emphasis placed on just what is happening with this man. He’s not just made well, he’s saved. He’s not just hitting “play” after his leprosy hit the “pause” button. He’s getting a restart.

This is the difference: cleanliness is a continuation of a life that has been put on pause, everything continuing as it always has been. Wellness is a restart, another shot at living a better life, every day new and amazing, free of not just blemishes but worries. All that’s required to be well is faith: faith that all things are possible through God, faith that no one is beyond help or healing. This is the faith that Jesus just got done talking to his disciples about: faith the size of a mustard seed, a faith that knows no boundaries. It really makes us wonder how great of a faith we all have and whether or not we are made well by it. So, I ask, has your faith made you not just clean, but well?