

The Lord is Out There

Luke 17:11-19

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 9, 2016

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

In order to fully understand what our Lord is doing in Luke 17 and in all of His healing ministry I am going to abandon form for the sake of explanation.

In the books of Exodus and Leviticus God sets up "layers" to the earth. These layers are determined by His presence. Some layers are closer to God and some layers are further away from Him.

In the Old Testament God dwells in the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies at first is in the tabernacle which is an elaborate tent set up by Moses at God's command. Then later when Solomon builds the temple the Holy of Holies is located in the innermost chamber of the temple. In terms of objects there is nothing in the Holy of Holies except the Ark of the Covenant. Above the ark is where God dwells on earth. Once the presence of God is on the earth it sets up layers on the earth. The closer you are to God the holier you need to be. The less holy you are the further away from God that you are. To be closer to God is to live. To be further away from God is to die. Life is in the presence of God. Death is in the absence of God.

Ok. The Holy of Holies in the Old Testament is the most holy place on earth because that is where God is. The room is adorned with gold. And no one is allowed to go into the Holy of Holies except the High Priest and he can only go in there once a year.

Outside of the Holy of Holies is another room called the Holy Place. It is holy, but not as holy as the Holy of Holies. The Holy Place is not where God dwells, but it is right next door to it. The room is adorned with gold and with some silver. All of the priests, not just the high priest, may enter the holy place.

Outside of the Holy Place is the courtyard of the tabernacle or when the temple was built the courtyard of the temple. The courtyard is open to the air so that the Israelites may make their sacrifices. Any clean Israelite may enter into the courtyard of the tabernacle to offer his or her sacrifice. So not only may the high priest and the priests be in the courtyard, but so may any Israelite. The courtyard is adorned with bronze.

Outside of the courtyard is the nation of Israel. That is the next layer out from God's presence in the Holy of Holies. Some of you who have read the book of Numbers know that I am simplifying things a little here, but I don't want to belabor this too much. I want to tell you enough so that you understand what is going on with these lepers in Luke 17.

Outside of the nation of Israel, one more layer out, are the long term unclean Israelites. The long term unclean Israelites are those Israelites who had some kind of external illness that was leading toward death. In the book of Leviticus God lists several of these. Bleeding that could not be stopped was one of them. Another was leprosy. Leprosy included all kinds of skin conditions, not just what we think of when we think of leprosy, but it did include our form of leprosy, which involved the rotting away of the flesh of a person even while they were alive. Such people were put outside of the community of Israel. They were not allowed to go to the tabernacle at all to offer sacrifices. And let us be clear on this point. God put them out there. It is not because of the legalism of the Pharisees that these people are put outside of the rest of Israel. God Himself commanded that such people be put out side of Israel and banned from making sacrifices to Him.

Why would God do that? The reason is simple. The wages of sin is death. These people have a form of death on them that manifests itself in their flesh. Such a manifestation of death was not permitted

to stand in the presence of the holy God. In the presence of the holy God there is only life. And lest you think God is being narrow minded about all of this. Consider this: God did not have to put His presence on the earth at all. He could have kept Himself in heaven and left us to our unclean death. Instead He chose to come to earth, reside in the tabernacle, and give life. The question is not, "Why are these people cast out of God's presence?" The question is "Why is the high priest permitted into His presence?"

Now outside of the unclean Israelites is another layer: the gentiles. In the Old Testament we Gentiles were further away from the presence of God than even the lepers in Israel. Then outside of the Gentiles was the final layer: death. This is why in the book of Ephesians God tells the Gentiles, "You who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

Now, if I am an Israelite and I catch leprosy, I have my death manifesting itself in my body in advance. By the way, all sickness to one degree or another is an advance manifestation of your coming death due to your sin. Now if I am an Israelite who has such a manifestation of death in my body, I move one layer out from the presence of God. If I am healed from my leprosy, I move a layer closer to God and return to the community of Israel.

God commanded that such a return to the community of Israel be accompanied by sacrifice. If a leper got healed of his leprosy, he would send for the priest and the priest would come and examine him according to God's command and standards. If the priest determined that the man was in fact healed, then the priest would make sacrifices of animals on behalf of the healed leper. The priest would also take him through the bathing that God commanded. Then the person was readmitted to Israel and could approach God at the tabernacle and offer sacrifices for his forgiveness, etc.

In fact God commanded sacrifices any time a person moved from one layer of Israel to another. A leper had sacrifices made for him when he moved from the layer of lepers to the layer of Israel. A descendent of Aaron had sacrifices made when he moved from the layer of Israel to the layer of priest, and so one.

Moving away from God in the layers was easy, just get sick and die. Moving closer to God's presence required a blood sacrifice. Do you see how this works? In Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, there is no sacrifice that God commands to get us, Gentiles, into His presence. There are exceptions. There are Gentiles in the Old Testament who do enter into Israel, but those are exceptions. We Gentiles do not enter into the presence of God en masse until one great sacrifice is performed, a sacrifice that will end all sacrifices.

So when Jesus tells these lepers to show themselves to the priests, He is telling them to go and show the priests that they had been healed so that the priest could perform the necessary sacrifice to return them into the community of Israel.

In fact earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus heals an individual leper and tells him to offer the sacrifice that Moses commanded as a testimony to them. Obviously what Jesus means is that the healed leper should call for the priest. The priest should examine him and certify that God had healed him and then perform the sacrifice necessary to return him into Israel and allow him access to the mercy of God at the tabernacle. Jesus calls such a sacrifice a witness to the priests. How does the sacrifice witness to the priests? Well, the sacrifice was performed when God healed a leper and by doing so returned the leper to the community of Israel. Even in the Old Testament the leper was healed by God, not the priest. The priest merely certified the healing and performed sacrifices to return the healed leper to the community of Israel, return him to a layer of humanity that was allowed to make sacrifices for atonement before God. The sacrifice therefore would testify to the priest that God had healed this leper and lo and behold God is the man from Nazareth! The sacrifice is a testimony to the priests that Jesus is the Lord of heaven and

earth. God is now walking around and healing people. He is Jesus from Nazareth. The presence of God has left the Holy of Holies and is now out among the lepers healing them and returning them to God's presence. He is out there healing them and returning them to life. It is no wonder that the God from Nazareth also raises the dead! So that even if you are in the outermost layer further away from God than anyone else, the God from Nazareth raises you from the dead and returns you into His gracious presence. In order to move up in the layers a sacrifice is made and it will take one gigantic sacrifice to get the dead out of the layer that is furthest away from the presence of God. And so the God from Nazareth makes the largest sacrifice that can be made, He offers Himself and in one fell swoop the layers between God and fallen humanity are removed. Even the dead are raised as Matthew records it in His Gospel. No wonder Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that the curtain of the temple was torn in two. There is no more separation between the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place. All of the layers are gone. Everyone is restored to the presence of God. Only those who reject it return to the realm of death because that is where they wanted to be. And so in our sanctuary there is no curtain between you and the Holy of Holies. There are communion rails to give you a place to kneel and to remind you of where it was, but there is no barrier here. There is no curtain here. The priests of God eat the sacrifice and are hallowed and fitted to stand in the presence of God.

Therefore sickness no longer puts you out from the presence of God. In fact in 1Corinthians 11 the sick are exhorted to receive the presence of God in the Sacrament of the Altar for their healing! Therefore every healing that takes place in the congregation is a sign of the coming resurrection of the dead that the Lord will perform at the end of time. Such resurrection is necessary in order to put us in the presence of God forever. The dead do not stand in His presence.

And so when Jesus sends them to the priests, He is sending them to bear witness to them again that God is still out there healing lepers. God is still out there leveling death. God is still out there bringing life and bringing people closer to God. When the sacrifice would have been offered the priests at the temple make the sacrifices on behalf of these ten men, they will once again be told that God is from Nazareth, this Jesus whom they will crucify.

But the Samaritan knows that the priests at the temple will not accept him. He is a Gentile. He is from the layer closest to death. In fact he is not just a Gentile, until he met Jesus he was a leprous Gentile. In the world that God set up when He put His presence on earth in the tabernacle, until Jesus came along this man had one foot in the grave. Then Jesus healed him of his leprosy. For all intents and purposes he rose from the dead. He is now ready to stand in the presence of God, but he knows that the priests at the temple would never allow that. So what does he do? He returns to Jesus, falls at His feet, glorifies God and gives thanks to Him. The Samaritan's face is on the ground because the healing has born testimony to him that these Jesus is God on high. And what else do you with God on high except to accept His healing and give Him thanks and praise?

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.