

Clean (Jesus' Version)

Luke 17:11-19

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The words -

“Hung my head as I lost the war
And the sky turned black like a perfect storm
The rain came pouring down when I was drowning
That’s when I could finally breathe
Any by morning, gone was any trace of you
I think I am finally clean” (Swift 2014).

Brokenness can sometimes become the soundtrack to our lives. The lyrics I read are from the song “Clean” written and performed by Taylor Alison Swift, currently, the most popular music artist in the world. A Wall Street Journal article written last Wednesday by Peggy Noonan reported this about Swift’s North American Eras Concert Tour... Are you ready for it? “When Ms. Swift played Los Angeles for six sold-out nights in August she brought a reported \$320 million dollar local windfall with her, including 3,300 jobs and a \$160 million dollar increase in local earnings” (Noonan 2023). “Bloomberg Economics reports the U.S. gross domestic product went up an estimated \$4.3 billion dollars as a result of her first 53 concerts” (Noonan 2023). What makes Taylor Swift so popular to her millions of fans, known as Swifties? Swift’s down to earth demeanor and the fact that she writes her own songs and sings mostly about her brokenness, struggles, breakups, betrayals, and mistakes. Brokenness can sometimes become the soundtrack to our lives.

Most of us don’t go around talking about our brokenness...much less singing about it to millions of people, but it does make me wonder, from what brokenness do (you and I) need healing? From what brokenness do *we* need to be made *clean*?

And what if (like the ten men in the scripture in Luke chapter 17) we had to announce our brokenness to others so they knew before they approached us?

What would we cry out? The same things Swift sings about? Or maybe finances, depression, loneliness, estranged family relationships, addiction, sickness, anxiety, pride, fear of failure, betrayal of a best friend, or fear of abandonment.

Today’s Bible story is one of the miracles only found in the Gospel of Luke. Other stories only found in Luke include: the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son. You see, Luke loves the outsider, the marginalized, and the brokenness of the outcasts of society, and Luke’s goal is for you to understand that God loves these outcasts too!

The men in the scripture had to announce that they were “UNCLEAN” because of a skin disease? The New Revised Standard Updated Version uses skin disease to describe what the ten men suffered from.

Other or older versions use the word leprosy. According to John T Carroll in his commentary of Luke's Gospel, it was skin conditions of varying descriptions and severities, including spotting, open sores, and lesions, and with this diagnosis or assumption of diagnosis, people were "segregated from the community and any contact with them rendered one unclean" (Carroll 2023: 127).

In verse 11, the first five words provide some context, "on the way to Jerusalem" (Luke 17:11 NRSV). It may well have said "on the way to the cross" because this would be Jesus' final journey to this city. The rest of verse 11 intrigued me as well - Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. Do you know what is intriguing about that? Well, I looked on a map, and technically, there is no region between Samaria and Galilee...they border one another. So, I dug deeper. Jesus and the disciples found themselves in that "in-between land." According to Father Steve White an Episcopal priest in his writing, "Standing Between Samaria and Galilee," the land between Samaria and Galilee is neither one or the other. "It is a place where it is impossible to forget that the two had once been one. At one time it had been all one land. The land of the people of Israel. This in-between place is a place where you might find yourself unsure of who belonged and who didn't, where you might be uncertain, untrusting, even a little fearful" (White 2019). Many things about an in-between place resonate with me. I think of our United Methodist denomination, many churches in my conference have disaffiliated. In our own denomination, we are in an in-between place. In my professional life, I am in-between - in-between one career and another. Father White writes that it is a place where the customs and rules might not apply --- where you would not fully know your place, and he says, "It is the place where Jesus travels today. It is a place where, if we are where we are called to be, you and I are traveling every day."

Jesus is about to enter the city when we read that ten men get Jesus' attention...keeping their distance. We already know they have a skin disease. The ten men cry out to him, "Master, have mercy on us" (Luke 17: 13 NRSV). Note the term "Master" used by these men; "Master" was the name only the disciples had called Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. In verse 14, when Jesus sees them, Jesus says "Go and show yourselves to the priest. So, they turn around and start going. "And as they went, they were made CLEAN." Jesus didn't merely say healed; Jesus said made CLEAN. Now, *one* man looked at his skin, and turned back, praising God with a loud voice. The man fell at Jesus' feet in gratitude. One of the ten. Ten percent of the men that were made clean, returned to give thanks. The first time I read this scripture I thought ten percent; that is *not* a lot. Then, I immediately thought about my tithe. Ouch. Ten percent, ... and it made me wonder why I feel that *that* ten percent is so much more. The other nine never offered thanks or showed gratitude. Perhaps, they were too busy and ready to get back to their lives. Jesus asks in verse 17, "Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine?" Jesus remarked that the only one to return to give glory to God was the foreigner, the Samaritan. So he told the Samaritan "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17: 18-19).

Meda Stamper, New Testament theologian, reminds us of the two important themes in Luke: Jesus' care for the marginalized and what exactly is an appropriate response to Jesus, a response of faithful recognition and gratitude (Stamper 2013). Stamper also says, "There is no doubt something to be understood here about the people who live on the margins of our communities, who are treated as invisible or unloved because of how they look or who they are or where they come from. Jesus clearly

notices and loves them and calls **us** to do the same.” Stamper reminds us that “the one who has been given much also loves greatly. Love that springs from gratitude is the essence of faith” (Stamper 2013).

How do we express or show gratitude? What does expressing gratitude look like?

In a 2018 article by Summer Allen of University of California at Berkeley, she reports on two areas of scientific research about gratitude: genetics and the brain. Genetics, it seems, can play a part in how grateful people are, specifically genetic variants of the gene CD38. Other research shows that brain structure could be different in people who show more gratitude. One study found people who are prone to gratitude have more gray matter in their right inferior temporal cortex, and why is gray matter important? Gray matter enables you to control movement, memory, and emotions. But wait, before you substantiate people’s lack of gratitude on genetics or their brains, the good news is “these differences are not static. Consistently making an effort to be grateful can physically change our brains over the long run” (Allen 2018: 8). In other words, consistently making an effort to be grateful can help you heal?

Which leads me to ask, how can we, as Christ followers, express our thanks and gratitude to God? Although I shared about genetics and the brain in regards to gratitude, we also need to practice gratitude through praise, prayer, and service to God and others.

We show our gratitude to God through praising and worshiping God. We praise and worship God by giving God more time in our daily lives. God longs to be in covenant with us. How many times do we pray for an outcome and remember to go back a week, a month, or even a year later and thank God.

Many times we use the terms thankful and grateful interchangeably; however, being thankful is a feeling. Being grateful is an action; gratitude calls us to service. I know, personally, how God’s power can work to heal, to cleanse, and to call us into action. One year ago, if you had told me that I would be standing here speaking to you, I would have laughed hysterically. On November 26, 2022, I was happily teaching high school in my 31st year of public education with no inkling of retirement. I loved my job. I love teenagers. I *still* love teenagers; they are my favorite people. I was comfortable. Comfortable. But God doesn’t call us to be comfortable. God used *this church*, Mt. Vernon Place UMC and Pastor Donna and Minister Lee and you all, to change the course of my life. I know and believe the importance of *your* role in the community, the community inside this church, the community online (through which I normally participate), and the greater community on the *outside* of this building. Those who, like the ten men in Luke 17, wait and cry out, “Have mercy on us.” I know and believe the need for this community of believers to change the lives of your neighbors. In fact, with my whole being, I believe that *this* congregation can, in fact, transform this city. *You* can transform Washington DC - more than politicians, more than lawmakers, more than law enforcement, Mt. Vernon Place United Methodist Church. Yes, I understand what I am saying. I *know* you can make a difference, the biggest difference. I *believe*- that you can transform lives and this city. I also believe when *you* decide it’s time to transform this city that God and a host of others will show up to help you make it happen. Thanks be to God. The time is *now*. Let’s Go!

And in the words of Taylor Swift, “Are you ready for it?”

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