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“May He grant you joy of heart and may peace abide among you” (Sirach 50:24).

Sir 50:22-24; Ps 145: 1 Cor 1:3-9; Luke 17:11-19

The Lectionary provides a special set of readings for the American holiday of Thanksgiving, each one celebrating gratitude. The familiar Gospel selection highlights the gratitude of the one leper by contrasting it to the ingratitude of the other nine. This has inspired some fairly heavy sermons delivered on what is meant to be a holiday, but thankfully the story itself has enough details to suggest that something wonderful happened for all 10 lepers that day that enabled them to rejoin their families and communities with enormous gratitude and joy.

The 10 lepers were outcasts, excluded from every aspect of ordinary life for fear of contagion. In a prescientific culture, their skin disease, like blindness and paralysis, was attributed to sin or unclean spirits and judged not by medical criteria but as some kind of moral or theological fault, requiring them to be examined by priests in order to be readmitted to the community.

Their common plight had formed them into a small community of beggars. Remarkably, a Samaritan leper was no better or no worse than a Jewish leper, their shared disease proving to be a great leveler among them as simply human beings struggling to survive. They had heard about Jesus as they begged at the outskirts of

villages or near the roadways. When he passed by, they raised their voices from a distance to beg for mercy. They must also have heard that Jesus did not shun the sick or sinners, and this gave them hope.

Jesus had experienced enough disdain from the priests, scribes and Pharisees for consorting with sinners and illegal contact with lepers to know what being an outcast felt like. He sent the lepers to the priests to show what compassion could do that judgment could not. On the way, all 10 lepers were healed. The Samaritan, rather than go to the Jewish priests, returned to Jesus. We know the rest of the story, including Luke's use of it to shame critics of his Christian community as lawbreakers and heretics for believing in Jesus.

The Gospel falls to us today in a time of contagion, social distancing and plenty of judging and division based on political loyalties. There is much to reflect on, but the theme of being restored to community despite our differences is central. The pandemic has reminded us that we are all mortal, members of one human family with the same desire to be well and free of fear. Everyone wants to be in community, to be safe, fed and cared for. Those who have these blessings have much to be grateful for. Those who do not and are on the outskirts are hoping others will hear their distress.

Thanksgiving is historically and traditionally a time to bring these two groups together, the haves and have nots. In this most abnormal and difficult Thanksgiving of 2020, wouldn't that miracle of togetherness be something to celebrate and remember?

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