

**Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)**

*Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers*

<sup>11</sup> On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup> As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, <sup>13</sup> they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” <sup>14</sup> When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. <sup>15</sup> Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup> He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup> Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” <sup>18</sup> Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” <sup>19</sup> Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

## Out of Jail Free?

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The Parker Brothers board game, Monopoly, is reckoned to be the best-selling commercial game of all time. It is estimated that since its patent in 1935, 700 million people have played Monopoly. I imagine that number includes a good many of us gathered here today. Am I right? How many of you have ever played Monopoly? Monopoly is popular, and its popularity isn't just a fad, either. Children and adults of every generation have enjoyed it since its inception.

What has made Monopoly so popular? There are probably a lot of things, but one thing that immediately comes to mind is that Monopoly is one version of life itself, played on a board. The idea is to accumulate property and develop it to maximize wealth. Ultimately, the goal is to put everyone else out of business. You buy properties. You build houses and hotels. You collect rents. But of course, others are doing the same thing. It's a competition. So, sometimes you pay rent. At other times you have to pay taxes. And at one point or another, you go to jail. The board game seems to make the assumption that those who grasp after wealth and look to drive others to the poorhouse will from time to time cross the bounds of legal conduct and end up behind bars.

As in real life, going to jail in Monopoly is a bad deal. When you're in jail, you're not in the game. Depending on the rules you play the game by, you may not collect any rent while you're in jail. You certainly cannot buy any properties when you're in jail. And often, unless you are willing to stay in jail for your whole sentence, you'll pay hard, cold cash to get out of jail. The only exception, you may recall, is if you happen to own a "get out of jail free" card. If you have a "get out of jail free" card, then you can hand it in and rejoin the game as if nothing ever happened. Obviously, these "get out of jail free" cards are great to have in the game of Monopoly.

Monopoly came to my mind today when I thought of the ten lepers that Jesus ran into in the region between Samaria and Galilee. Or to be more precise, being in jail in the game of Monopoly came to mind.

Lepers were feared and shunned in Jesus' day. They were out of the game, in jail, so to speak. They weren't behind bars, but in some ways where they were was worse. No one – family, friends business associates – no one wanted anything to do with them. They couldn't work. They couldn't go to market. They couldn't even go home. Some people would not eat an egg purchased in a street where there was someone with leprosy. Others threw stones at lepers in order to keep them away. Lepers couldn't come within the walled cities. They had to stay stipulated distances from other people. They could go to synagogue, but they were restricted to a set-off place, and they had to come before everyone else came and leave after everyone else left. That way no one would have to look at them, or worse, come in contact with them. Lepers were not in the game. In Monopoly terms, they owned no property and buildings. They collected no

rent. They weren't found at Boardwalk or Park Place. They didn't have any railroads or utilities. They had no belongings to be taxed. They were in that corner of the board between Marvin Gardens and Pacific Avenue, that corner that every other player in the game desperately tried to avoid. They were in jail, and in their case there was no way to buy their way out.

So, in the region between Samaria and Galilee, out on the far corner of the board, out in the no-man's-land between two old feuding cultures comes Jesus and his disciples. What are they doing out there, anyway? Out in this no-man's land? What are Jesus and his disciples doing out in this God-forsaken place? That's a bigger story than we can answer all of today. But suffice it to say that Jesus came from the Galilee. Nazareth was his home town. Galileans were Jews, but they were mostly written off. One of John the Baptist's disciples once flippantly asked, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" The Galilee was a long way from the action in Jerusalem in Judea. Not only that, but between Galilee and Judea lay Samaria, a land and people that neither the Judeans nor the Galileans were willing to claim. The Galilee was separated by the great gulfs of distance and foreign culture from Jerusalem. That Jesus was a Galilean posed something of a problem for his religious authority. So, already at Jesus' birth we see the Gospel writers careful to spell out Jesus' connection with Judea. He must be the son of David, offspring of Jesse's root. To make the point unmistakable, Joseph and poor Mary in the last days of her pregnancy had to trek through the mountainous terrain all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that Jesus could be born in royal David's city. Galilee was out in the hinterlands, inconsequential. And furthermore, to go from Galilee to Judea you had to go through the even more inferior, forsaken land of Samaria. So, this morning we find Jesus and his rag-tag band out in the borderland between these two lesser regions, out where lepers might be found.

As they came into one of the villages, ten lepers approached them. The lepers kept their distance. They didn't come too close. They'd had enough rocks and nasty epithets thrown at them already. They kept a respectful distance and cried out for help. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Remarkably, Jesus sends the ten to the priests. "Go Show yourselves to the priests," he says. We aren't told why Jesus sent them to the priests. We're not told what if anything Jesus or the priests actually did. All we know is that Jesus told them to go show themselves to the priests, and miraculously the ten were cured. It says they were made clean.

It sounds almost anticlimactic. They go to the priests. They are cured. They go on their way. But look what has just happened. These ten lepers were just given "get out of jail free" cards. They were now back in the game. They could leave the forlorn corners of their exile. Now they could throw the dice. They could buy property. They could collect rent. They could build hotels. They could pass GO and collect \$200. Oh yes, they were back in the game. And down the road they went, dancing a jig, singing, "We're back! We're back!" Away they went, back into the game.

Except one. One, a Samaritan it turns out, came back, fell on his knees before Jesus, and thanked God for what had just happened to him. One was thoughtful enough to say thank you.

Let's be clear. This is not a story about politeness. The point of the story isn't that one of the lepers had the decency to come back and say thank you. I'm a great fan of politeness and saying thanks, but the story is about more than being polite. And it's about more than giving thanks to God. That's another thing I'm a big fan of, giving thanks to God. But this isn't

principally a story about giving thanks to God.

Good friends, this is a story about changing the way the very game of life is played. In almost every case the lepers in the Bible stand in for those whom society has rejected and marginalized. It's not an accident that Jesus hangs out with the lepers and the other outcasts. And it's not just that Jesus is a nice, compassionate, sensitive guy, which you would expect from the son of God. Now I'm a big fan of compassion and Jesus' compassion in particular. Don't get me wrong. But Jesus is after something even deeper here.

Jesus understands that the way his society works is a lot like the game of Monopoly. The idea is to come out the winner. To become the winner, you're in the game, and you eliminate all the others. In the game of life the ways to eliminate the other players are several. And among the most tried and true is to isolate and write them off. To make them outcasts. To turn them into victims. To put them in the exile of jail, in Monopoly-speak. The Galileans marginalize the Samaritans. The Judeans marginalize both the Galileans and the Samaritans. Everybody marginalizes the lepers and the lame. It's easy enough to do, this putting others into jail. We wonder what sin caused them to be afflicted the way they are. That's probably the most reliable way. Who can fault us when we reject those who are sinners. So, in the Monopoly game of Jesus' society, and can we say it's not true in ours? In the Monopoly game of society the victimized and marginalized were taken out of the game, put into jail, as it were, because they were sinners, unclean. That removes one set of competitors from the board. Keep doing it long enough and well enough, and with good fortune, you're the only one left.

And then along comes Jesus. And he heals the marginalized of the very things that have served to exclude them from this game. He heals the lepers. He heals the lame and mad. He welcomes the tax collectors. Jesus runs around all over ancient Syria-Palestine handing out "get out of jail free" cards.

But so many, including his own disciples, who themselves are from the Galilee and should know better, so many think that the "get out of jail free" card is meant to just get them out of jail and put them back into the same old game. Now they are players again. The disciples want Jesus to be that heir to the throne of David who will put them on top. James and John, you recall, were already working on the seating charts. The two disciples we talk about every month at communion left Jerusalem shaking their heads and saying, "Oh man, we thought he was the one who would be a prophet like Moses and lead us to victory," who would put us back in the game. Those who crucified him mocked him with a sign over his head that read, "King of the Jews," meaning that if he's such a king, why doesn't he just come down from the cross and show us his power, show us he can play the game.

Jesus went all over the ancient middle-east handing out "get out of jail free" cards, and almost everyone thought he was putting them back into the game. But not unlike the tables he overturned in the Temple, Jesus meant to overturn the whole Monopoly set. The "get out of jail free" cards were not meant to free them to get back into the game. The "get out of jail free" cards are meant to free them from the game itself. Jesus understood that the real problem was that the game required victims and losers, for that was how winners were made. It was a very simple game in that sense.

We read this morning of the ten lepers who are miraculously cured. One, it seems understood the real ramifications. He returned, fell on his knees and praised God for the new day. I would be remiss if I didn't remark that he was the most maligned of all of them. He was a

leper and a Samaritan. Is there something about being at rock-bottom that makes it more likely we'll understand Jesus' message? The other nine? Well, Michael Hardin says it well, "A new sociality had been given in the miracle that they failed to grasp and so they took this gift from God and walked right back to the system that had previously excluded them without seeing or understanding that something indeed was 'bent' about the system."

Brothers and sisters, this is far from trivial business. We live in systems that all too often chew us up and spit us out. Much of the time, when we are on the board, players. We participate in the chewing up and spitting out each other in the game. Yet, very often, at least speaking for myself, we ask God for a miracle that will get us back in the game if we're down on our luck and find ourselves out on the corner of the board. Or if we're in the game, we pray that God allow us to keep playing, to survive. Or if we are bold, we pray for a miracle that will allow us to excel in the game and win it all. But Jesus keeps handing out the "get out of jail free" cards, hoping that we will recognize that the jail is not limited to that corner over between Marvin Gardens and Pacific Avenue. He hopes that the cards he gives us will help us free ourselves to play a different game altogether. Jesus understands that in the whole game, that anywhere on the board, we are actually in jail. The card he offers us is meant not to make us winners in the game, but to free us to a new life that no longer requires victims and losers, a new life in which winning it all takes on a very different meaning. A new life so unbelievable that when we see it we can do nothing but fall on our knees and offer God our thanks. Amen.