

Salvation on the Seventh Avenue Subway

Luke 17:11-19

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

For anyone who rides the Seventh Avenue subway with any regularity, it’s a familiar routine. The crowded subway car lurches forward, and suddenly a loud voice interrupts whatever hard-won reverie you have managed to muster. “Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen.” The passengers look up briefly from their newspapers or their cell phones or their I-Pods and then furtively at one another to judge the reaction of others. The eyes tell the story, “O no, here we go again.”

By this time the plaintive man is jingling the coins in his empty coffee cup. “Can you help me with some change to buy some food?” he pleads. And then perhaps an explanation: no job, bad leg, lost my apartment. The subway car pitches along the tracks, and, as the beggar pushes through the

crowd, each passenger makes a quick calculation about how to respond: ignore him, pretend we didn't hear, dig into our pockets for a coin or two – or even, if the plea seems legitimate or if it's a woman – a couple of dollars. And then a silent sigh of relief when the door slams behind him as he moves on to the next car to make his case all over again.

I wonder if Jesus cringed, even for a moment, when he saw the ten lepers headed his way. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” they called. Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, to the cross, after all. So he had his own burdens and misery with which to contend. Perhaps, if only fleetingly, he wished that the lepers would simply go away, much the way that we wish the beggars on the subway would go away.

No such luck. Jesus deals with them, tells them to present themselves to the priests. As they turned to go, Luke tells us, they “were made clean.” They were healed.

Nine of the ten continued on their way. But one of them, seeing that he had been healed, turned back to say thank you.

What are we to make of this? This is the season for stewardship, and I wonder if we might read some significance into the fact that one out of the ten lepers, ten percent, returns to Jesus to express his gratitude. The scriptures, after all, say that ten percent of what we have belongs to the Lord.

That may be a useful reminder, but I think something larger is at stake here. I wonder if Luke isn't saying here that faith is more than believing; it entails seeing as well. The one leper, now healed, noticed his changed circumstances, and he wanted to express his gratitude. He threw himself at Jesus' feet. And notice what Jesus says to him: “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Other translations read, “Your faith has saved you.”

And so it is. I'm tempted to read universalism into this passage. Universalism, or universal salvation, is the doctrine that God eventually

draws everyone, all of creation, back to himself. My reading of the New Testament is that no one, no one, is consigned to perdition. In today's Gospel, ten lepers are healed, but only one has the grace to recognize his healing, his changed circumstances. And he responds by expressing his gratitude in this life, in the here and now.

That doesn't alter the fact that the other nine lepers have been healed. They continue blithely on their way. But the one who is truly blessed is the man who has the grace to see and to understand the magnitude of his healing.

And so it is with us. The ability to recognize our salvation, the ability to acknowledge Jesus as Lord in *this* life, is the greatest of all gifts. With the coming of Jesus we are changed, together with all of humanity. But the fact that we recognize our salvation gives us the full measure of grace – in this life, without waiting for the next.

One afternoon, now long ago, while I was headed downtown on the Seventh Avenue subway during rush hour, a man appeared in the car. "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," he said in a loud voice. But then something different. "I'm not asking for money." Everyone, I think, heaved a sigh of relief. And then the man continued with his story. He used to ride the Seventh Avenue subway begging for money, he said. After a while, however, and due in no small measure to the kindness of riders on the Number One train, he said, he was able finally to get a job and secure an apartment.

"I'm riding the subway today," he said, "because I wanted to come back and say thank you for helping me." The car was silent. "God bless you," he concluded and continued on to the next subway car.

Somehow, somehow, I think that man understood something about grace.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 10, 2010

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut