

# A TOUCH OF GRACE

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Luke 17:11-19

November 23, 2008

(THANKSGIVING SUNDAY)

There was a man named Ned, Ned Moore, who lived somewhere in the little town of Beaver, West Virginia almost twenty years ago. And he wasn't *popular*, really, but he *was* well-known. Everybody in Beaver knew all about him whether they wanted to or not. Because Ned was something like a *landmark* in Beaver. He was up in years with snow white hair and a snow white beard. And my guess is more people knew him, or knew *about* him, than any other resident in the history of Beaver.

You see, Ned Moore was to Beaver what Otis was to Mayberry. He was the official town drunk. Though unlike Otis, Ned was skinny as a rail. And he didn't take care of himself. He didn't eat well, and he hardly ever went to the doctor. And there wasn't anyone at home to look after him, really, because Ned wasn't married. He *had* been at one time. But not long after the wedding, his wife left him for another man.

Ned started drinking. And as far as anyone could tell, he never stopped. He drank every day of his life. And *that's* about all anyone could say about him, really -- that Ned was the town drunk. Worthless. Good for nothing. A waste of flesh, people said. A scar on the face of the community... But let me tell you a something about him that a lot people never knew. Ned Moore, the town drunk, was one of the most *grateful* people I've ever known.

Ned came down with pneumonia one winter. The poor man was nothing but skin and bones already. And he was a smoker. Two packs a day or more. And he was up in years to boot. The truth is he had so many things working against him that his body just couldn't fight off the disease. So he ended up in the hospital. I don't remember how I found out about it, or who asked me to see him. But I did for some reason. I went to see him in the hospital. And I

walked into his room ... and I've never seen *anyone* so glad to have a visitor, someone he *didn't even know*.

I went to see Ned several times there in the hospital. And I'd always have a prayer with him before I left. And he would just be in tears every time. ✘  
“**Do you think God *really* loves me?**” he'd ask.

“Oh, yes, Ned. God loves you. God loves you more than you can even imagine,” I'd say. (In some ways it was like talking to a little child.) Every time we prayed, every time I went to visit, he would ask the same thing. And every time I would tell him that God loved him so much that he'd rather die than be without him ... that “*God so loved Ned Moore that he gave his only begotten Son.*”

And Ned surrendered. He gave up. Gave his life to Christ. Gave him his sins, and his hurt, and all of his pain. He gave Jesus his failures and all his disappointments. He gave him all the bitterness and sadness and sorrow he'd been living with for so many years. And he gave him his heart. And I baptized him there in the hospital with a little help from his nurse.

And he was thankful... A little more thankful than I was comfortable with, to be honest. He would grab onto my hand and he wouldn't let go. I thought I was going to have to drag him along with me out to the parking lot, because he just wouldn't let go. And on top of all that, *he gave me a new name*. “Preacher” wasn't good enough anymore. He had to call me something else. He called me ... well, he called me his ***Sweetheart-Sugar-Buddy***. Which was a little embarrassing... especially when he started telling the nurses and everyone else who came in, that that's who I was. They'd walk in while I was there and he wouldn't say “This is my pastor,” or “This is Preacher Tom from the church at Beaver,” or anything even *close* to that. “This is my ***Sweetheart Sugar Buddy***,” he'd say as my cheeks blushed and my ears turned bright red.

It was almost like being a little boy all over again when my Aunt Georgia would come from Detroit to spend Thanksgiving with us. She was just a little

too happy to see me, I thought. She would come through the door hugging and kissing everybody in sight. She'd start with my dad, her "little baby brother" she called him. And she'd just hug the daylights right out of him. And she'd hug my mom and kiss her on the cheek. And then she'd swoop down like a chicken hawk on my poor brother Kenny and nearly hug the hide right off of him. "Oh, let your Aunt Georgia get a good look at you," she'd say. And she'd cover his little round face with kisses. And if the *dog* was nearby she'd hug him, too! And *kiss* him. Right on the snout. (I was a boy -- a little boy, mind you. Made of snips and snails and puppy dog tails. But there's no way I'd do *that!*)

And then she'd say, "Now where's that baby?" I wasn't a baby. I was a kid. A boy, mind you. A man -- with training wheels, maybe, but I was *not* a baby! *But* that's what she called me -- her little baby. "Where's that baby," she'd say. "Come and give your Aunt Georgia some sugars." ✕

Well ... I was pretty sure I didn't have any sugars. I might have had a cookie in my pocket, but no sugars. And the next thing I knew she swooped down on me like a falcon on a field mouse. And she wrapped her arms around me and squeezed me till I was sure my insides were just going to shoot right out of my eyeballs.

And then she *kissed* me. Oh, it was horrible. She kissed me right on the cheek. And she always wore the brightest red lipstick you've ever seen. Left a big old *pucker print* right there on my face. (I'd have rather had a black eye!) "Give your Aunt Georgia some sugars," she'd say. Oh it was awful! Just awful!

And that's how it was with Ned Moore, the town drunk. It was like having my Aunt Georgia right there in Beaver. He was so full of love and gratitude he just had to *show* it. He had to let others see it -- no matter *how* it came out. And it dawned on me that they were the same. My Aunt Georgia wasn't the town drunk like Ned. But they were both terribly lonely. Georgia lived alone in Detroit -- in a part of the city that was known for its high rate of crime. She

felt isolated. Abandoned in a way. Cut off from her family and friends back home in Kentucky. And Ned knew about loneliness, too. He was abandoned by his own family. Rejected by everyone -- the whole community, really. And he was cut off from everyone ... even God, he thought.

But Jesus came to him. Not at the altar. Not in a church. Or a chapel. Or prayer room. Or even a closet. But Jesus came to him right where he was. And he touched the one that no one else would touch. And Ned's life was never the same ...

Isn't that what happened between Galilee and Samaria? Only it wasn't one person, it was ten. Ten people. And every one of them like Ned, in a way. Abandoned and outcast. Shunned by their neighbors, by the whole community, really. So they were cut off. Set apart. Made to live outside the walls. They weren't even allowed to stay in the village or anywhere *near* it. Because they all had those tell-tale white blotches on their arms and legs. And in those days, white spots meant leprosy. Which was a *hideous* thing. Because there was no cure. No salve or ointment could make the spots disappear. No potion or tonic could ease their suffering or give them even a *wee bit* of comfort. But instead, the disease would spread and leave them maimed, and mangled, and crippled and... dead.

But what it did to a person's "insides" was even worse, I think. Because it cut them off from their family and friends -- from their spouses, their children, and all of the people who meant so much to them. It cut them off from the church -- from the priests, and the temple, and the synagogue, even, and all of God's people. Because the law said ***if you have this disease, you are unclean -- your heart and your life and everything about you is tainted and soiled.*** Why else, people thought, would God let this happen? Something's not right and *it must be you.*

There were ten of them, says Luke. Ten lepers somewhere between Galilee and Samaria. Jesus *saw* them on his way to Jerusalem -- on his way up

to the *temple*. And when *they* saw him, they started shouting, “Jesus! Have mercy!” They *had* to shout. They didn’t dare come near him. “Jesus, master! Have mercy on us!”

And when Jesus saw them, he didn’t say, “Go wash in the Jordan,” or “Do this,” or “Do that.” He didn’t even say, “You are healed.” He just looked at them and said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” ✕ It’s what the law said to do if you were *cured*. You had to go to the priest. Because it was up to him to declare that you were clean (inside and out) and fit to come home and be part of God’s people.

Trouble is... there were *two* temples in those days. The one at Jerusalem, of course, and the other at Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worshiped. [Remember the woman at the well talking about that. She said, **“Our fathers -- the Samaritans -- worshiped on *this* mountain, but you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place people ought to worship.”** And -- do you remember what Jesus said to her? He said, **“The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”**] Anyway, these ten lepers were from the “land in between,” a place where there were Jews *and* Samaritans. So he didn’t tell them whether to go to this place or that -- or to this altar or that altar. He just said, **“Go show yourselves to the priests.”**

And they did. *All* of them ... that is, all but *one*. For Luke says on the way to show themselves to the priests they were all healed. Can you imagine? The blotches were gone, their health was restored! And as soon as the priests saw them, they could go home to their families. They could go back to their lives, even back to the Lord’s house to be in God’s presence and to give him their worship. They couldn’t wait! They were excited! They quickened the pace and hurried along, ready to get back to their lives.

But one of them turned around. And he ran back to Jesus. Went back to say thanks to the man who did this for him. Isn’t that right? ✕ Well, yes. It is. But did you notice *how* he said it? Did you hear what he did? He didn’t say,

“Thank you, Jesus,” or “Much obliged, sir,” or, “I can’t tell you just how much I appreciate this.” He didn’t do anything like that. But Luke says he went back to Jesus and without saying a word, he prostrated himself. He got down and stretched himself out on the ground at Jesus feet.

It’s a funny way to say thanks, when you think of it. You don’t do that to someone who bakes you a cake. You don’t even do that for your *doctor* when they cure what ails you. In fact, the *only* place people did that kind of thing in those days was *in the temple, before the altar. In the place where God was.*

And that’s what the tenth leper did. Only he wasn’t at the temple in Jerusalem, or at that other temple on Mount Gerizim. And he wasn’t at a holy place or a shrine that someone had built. He was with Jesus. Do you hear what that says? It says he was saying, “This is where God is. God is here. God is present in Jesus of Nazareth.”

And that means something else was going on here. This man wasn’t just healed of some horrible ailment. And he wasn’t just cured of some skin disease. But something *inside* him that was broken was put back together. Something deep in his heart and his spirit was made whole. And he was healed not just in body, but in spirit. For he had come to know in his heart of hearts that Jesus had another name. And that name was Emmanuel, God-with-us, God-in-the-flesh. And he had come to worship him in spirit and in truth. For Jesus had touched the untouchable. He came to him right where he was. And he touched the one that no one else would touch. And now he was fully restored -- not only to the community and to his family, but to God.

You see, when Jesus looked at Ned Moore he didn’t see someone who was worthless, or good for nothing. He didn’t see a scar on the face of the community. But he saw *somebody*. Someone created in the image of his Father. Someone for whom God would rather die than be without. And he saw the same thing when he looked at my Aunt -- the Detroit Hugger. And before either of them he saw it in those ten lepers. He didn’t just see ten

disease-mangled bodies. He saw ten *people*. And he saw their *longing*, their *yearning*, their great *need* for God's love.

We live in a place like that, too, you know. We live in an "in between place" -- a place where people suffer from dreadful diseases. Some they'd never seen or even heard of back in those days. Just scroll down our prayer list or your own personal prayer list and you'll see them. People suffering from all sorts of things. Cancers and diseases of the heart; things that are catching and things that aren't. Diseases and conditions passed from one hand to another, or from one generation to another. But Mother Teresa reminded us that the greatest disease in our world today is not TB or leprosy [or any of the other terrible things that afflict us]. But she said, "The greatest disease ... is the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted, deserted by everyone. The greatest disease," she said, "is the lack of love."

But it doesn't have to be a terminal illness. For even though we live in an "in between place" in our world, Jesus is here. His altar, his temple is wherever you are. And in his love all things -- all things are made new. Broken bodies, broken hearts, broken spirits, broken dreams.

I know a woman named Alma who lived all alone in a place full of people -- a place called New York City. She grew up in a home (if you could *call* it a home) that was broken by violence and abuse. Alma is an African-American woman in her mid-sixties, I'd say. And for most of those years she believed -- she *really believed* that she was something like a *leper*. Not on the outside, mind you, but on the inside. When she looked at herself she saw someone who just wasn't right. Someone deformed somehow in the deepest part of herself. And she honestly believed that she was unlovable -- that no one could love her or accept her -- and that no one would even want her to be near them, really, as if she was a hideous thing.

So, Alma didn't make many friends. And she didn't really know the people who lived there in her building. But Alma loved babies. So when she heard

that one of the hospitals needed volunteers to come and sit with babies who had AIDS, Alma went to the hospital and volunteered. And everyday, she would go and hold the babies in her arms. And she would talk to them, and rock them, and sing to them even. And the staff was amazed at how gentle and loving she was with the infants and how her face just seemed to glow whenever she took a little one into her arms.

One day, not long before Christmas, Alma was sitting there holding an AIDS baby in her arms and she heard a song -- it was a Christmas song playing over the speakers or on a radio somewhere. You know the song -- it says, *“Sweet little Jesus boy, they made you be born in a manger. Sweet little holy child we didn’t know who you were. Didn’t know you’d come to save us, Lord. To take our sins away. Our eyes were blind, we couldn’t see. And we didn’t know who you were.”*

Alma looked at the baby in her arms. And all of a sudden she was just overwhelmed with the thought and the feeling that Jesus was there. Jesus was there in that child, and there in that place. And when Alma left the hospital that day, she walked straight to a church and she talked to the priest. And she *lay her life before God*. And that day was the beginning, she says, of her healing -- her restoration. And now she knows that she is somebody who is *lovely* in God’s eyes and that she is loved.

Do you see what happened there? Jesus came. And he touched the one who thought she couldn’t be touched. The one who thought she was an outcast. A leper. Someone who simply couldn’t be loved. And now she has given her life to him so that God can touch others through her. So God can love them and care for them and let them know that he’d rather die than be without them.

That’s *thanksgiving*, I think. It’s thanking God with heart and hands and voice....

Do you long for that kind of healing love and grace? Is there brokenness in your life? In your body? Or in your soul? Know this. Jesus is here. And he is still the one who makes all things whole.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

## Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, OblSB

