I’ve long been intrigued by the story found in today’s Gospel lesson—this tale of ten lepers who cry out from a distance, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (Luke 17:13). In the days of Jesus lepers, you may remember, not only endured a debilitating skin disease; even more, lepers were regarded as living under a divine curse, labeled as ritually unclean, excluded from normal social interactions, forced to remain at a distance, required to stand at the very edges of society. In his relating of the story Luke offers the sketchiest of details, telling us simply that Jesus responds to the cry of the lepers with words of instruction, “Go and show yourselves to the priests (17:14).” Priests functioned as “purity inspectors” (Joel Green, The Gospel of Luke, p. 624); that is, they had authority to exclude the unclean and, conversely, to restore to the community those who had been healed. Though Jesus initially says nothing about healing, yet, Luke tells us, as those ten lepers follow the instructions of Jesus, they are “made clean” (17:14b). One of them turns back, praising God and expressing gratitude and joy to Jesus. It seems a small thing, this acknowledgment of gratitude. But it makes a huge difference.

I read recently that Buddhist teaching delineates three kinds of givers. The first are beggarly givers, those who give only after much hesitation, and even then, offer only their
leftovers, that which they no longer want or need. Before any act of sharing, beggarly givers struggle internally, questioning, “Should I give, or shouldn’t I?” haunted by a fear that they might give too much. In contrast, the second category of givers, friendly givers, includes people who give what they themselves may well use. Friendly givers share with far less deliberation than beggar givers, and with significantly more open-handedness. There is yet a third category, the kingly or regal givers, who offer the very best of what they have, sharing spontaneously without needing to deliberate at all. For regal givers, sharing with others has become “second nature,” a natural part of the way they conduct their living. Unselfishness, non-greed, is so strong in their hearts and minds that at every opportunity they share what they treasure in an easy and loving way.

As the leper turns back to Jesus, expressing appreciation and delight, he does so, recognizing that he has been the recipient of regal giving, that Jesus has bestowed upon him grace beyond measure. A small thing, perhaps, this matter of giving voice to gratitude, yet somehow it is in this leper’s expression of gratitude that he becomes part of something greater than himself; he becomes part of the “kingdom” movement Jesus is announcing. A seemingly small and insignificant act, and yet with some frequency, it is the quiet gestures, the generally unnoticed deeds, that unleash events of critical import. Recall, for example, the story of Rosa Parks, the African-American woman who on December 1, 1955 refused to give up her seat at the front of the “colored” section of a Montgomery, Alabama bus when more white riders entered the bus than their section could accommodate. Rosa Parks was not the first African-American to express dismay at the unjust segregation laws of the day; there had in fact been a few isolated occasions when an African-American had similarly
resisted the giving up of his or her seat, though it meant certain harassment and likely arrest. But somehow Rosa Parks’ decision that fateful December evening in 1955 unleashed a city-wide bus boycott that lasted more than a year and led to the overturning of legally enforced racial segregation in Montgomery. In the process, Martin Luther King, Jr. gained national exposure, and soon became chief spokesperson for the unfolding civil rights movement. In her book Quiet Strength Rosa Parks writes about that seemingly small decision, “I had no idea that history was being made. I was just tired of giving in. Somehow, I felt that what I did was right by standing up to that bus driver. I did not think about the consequences . . . . My feet were not tired, but I was tired—tired of unfair treatment” (pp. 23-24), tired of accommodating unjust and racist practices.

No doubt you also remember the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. In the Gospel of John’s version of that story a young boy generously shares what he has—five barley loaves and two fish—and wonder of wonders, the seemingly insignificant gift multiplies astronomically, so much so that when the hunger of all in the crowd has been satisfied, there remain twelve baskets of surplus food. What on the surface seems a meager gift, easily dismissed, Jesus is able to multiply, suggesting that when each of us does our part, together we find ourselves doing far more than we ever anticipated or thought possible. We find ourselves making a difference. Indeed, God can take little things in our lives, things seemingly insignificant, and multiply their impact way beyond our expectations. As each of us shares his or her gift, we begin to see signs of transformation and new life emerging all around us. We become instruments of God’s peace, proclaimers of God’s reconciliation, messengers of God’s compassion, founts of God’s grace.
Return with me to the story of the healed leper who turns back to Jesus, falling at Jesus’ feet, expressing gratitude and delight. Only at this point in the story does Luke add the intriguing phrase, “and he was a Samaritan” (v. 17). Samaritans, you may know, were viewed with contempt by the Jews. Though the two groups shared some common beliefs, they did not agree upon the center of worship. For the Jews, it was the Jerusalem temple; for Samaritans, a temple at Mt. Gerizim. Through the centuries a fierce antagonism developed, and by the time of Jesus Jewish disdain for Samaritans was epidemic. Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, in a story we now label the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shocked—and appalled—his hearers by making the hero of the story a despised Samaritan. That Samaritan was a regal giver, one who, because of his gracious display of compassion, his willingness to go the extra mile, his unselfish giving without thought of reward—because of all of this, the Samaritan becomes a model for us of faithful living.

In like manner, Jesus deems the healed Samaritan leper a model of faith. As the Samaritan kneels at the feet of Jesus and offers his thanks—signs of both submission and of reverence—Jesus turns to his disciples and to the surrounding crowd, questioning, “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?” And then, turning back to the Samaritan, Jesus affirms, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well” (vv. 18-19).

Your faith has made you well. The Samaritan may have been surprised by that affirmation, but even more, I’m quite certain, were all who heard Jesus’ pronouncement not only surprised—but likely dismayed and disturbed. The Jerusalem temple, you may know,
had an outer Court of the Gentiles, but at the entryway into the inner chambers of the
temple—accessible only to Jews—were inscriptions forbidding foreigners entry, upon
penalty of death. No one in that day—save Jesus—dared to describe Samaritans and
foreigners, Gentiles and the “unclean,” as models of faith. It is a reminder that God does not
limit God’s love to a select few. Instead, God’s grace extends to persons we may dismiss as
unreachable, just as God’s blessing extends to seemingly meager acts we would dismiss as
insignificant.

Pore through the Gospel accounts, and you will search in vain for evidence that Jesus
created detailed lists of doctrinal beliefs. No, Jesus’ focus was on the quality of our living,
and he ever urges us to examine our own hearts, to reflect upon what it might mean for us
to embody, with Jesus, a full measure of love. The healing and wholeness Jesus offered the
ten lepers—and so readily accepted by the Samaritan—was not just physical cleansing, but
even more, a healing of the heart. With that healing came fresh vision, new insight into
Jesus’ role in the inbreaking kingdom of God. The healed Samaritan leper sees what he had
not previously seen and understands what he had not previously understood, that Jesus is
the one who ushers us into full and abundant life, Jesus is the one who embodies the grace
and compassion, the mercy and peace, of our God, and Jesus is the one who enables us to
see life afresh. Along the way, we are empowered to embrace new levels of compassionate
and faithful living, new expressions of gratitude and generosity, new manifestations of
God’s abundant love and overflowing grace. We find ourselves shifting from beggarly givers
to friendly givers, and even on to regal givers.
A year before his tragic assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered an historic address in Riverside Church in New York City entitled “A Time to Break Silence.” It was at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned, and King boldly added his voice to those who condemned our nation’s war in Vietnam. King spoke of our need for “a radical revolution of values,” an alignment of compassionate care and just practices. Asserted Dr. King,

We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside . . . but one day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that a system that produces beggars must be reversed. We are called to be the Good Samaritan, but after you lift so many people out of the ditch you start to ask, maybe the whole road to Jericho needs to be repaved.

Repaving the whole road to Jericho—is this not what Jesus had in mind when inviting us into a new way of living? Shifting from beggarly giving to regal giving, from self-centeredness to gracious compassion, from doing our own thing to a recognition of how deeply intertwined we human beings are, one with the other. Small, seemingly insignificant acts may remain that way, unless we affirm that we are together in this journey of life and faith. With each of us doing our part, we do indeed discover that we are able to do far more than we had previously imagined. Together our gifts make a difference. Faithful in little, we are led well beyond solo acts to the challenging task of together repaving the road to Jericho, embracing a new set of values, doing justice, proclaiming peace, going the extra mile in relationships, living lives of generosity, loving tenderly, walking humbly with our God. May it be so among us! Amen.