

And Jesus laughed: Luke 17:11-19

by [Mark Harris](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

When I read this passage, I'd like to hear the inflection that Jesus gave to these words. "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" The inflection of the words makes a considerable impact on the meaning of the reading as heard, and would tell us much about Jesus' reaction to the healing of the lepers.

A good reader is a good actor, drawing from the words a richness that they would not otherwise have. Just as there is a great difference in reading a play and seeing and listening to it being performed, so there is a difference in reading scripture silently and hearing it read aloud in church. I sometimes wonder at the grace brought to a reading by a lector who bothered to learn about the text and its meaning, and then tried to give voice not only to the words but their power. And, of course, I sometimes cringe when a stony reading of a lively story makes it leaden and deadly.

It is too bad that we often put readers, ordained and lay, in costumes that shackle the creative reading of texts. No matter one's interpretation of the text—reading in cassock and surplice or robe puts a patina of ecclesiastical seriousness on the text and quells more adventurous interpretive intonations and inflections.

Some argue that that is precisely what we must do, that the role of preaching is to bring out the interpretation of texts and the responsibility of the individual hearer is to be informed by the text. But the quandary remains: if inflection and intonation are a natural part of speaking, what are we to do with them when sacred texts are read? And, more specifically, what are we to do with the Gospel text today?

How is the one speaking Jesus' words to say, "Where are the nine?" Harshly? With paternal interest? Should the reader sound scolding? And how should the reader give inflection and tone to "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" What sort of stress should be put on "foreigner"? Scorn? Affection? On the whole phrase? Amazement? Disappointment?

Perhaps we must come at it another way. Rather than wonder about specific inflections for these words and how each inflection influences the next, we might go

back a step and ask a more general question. In this case we might ask, “Was Jesus smiling when he spoke to the one (now former) leper who turned back to give thanks?”

To answer that question we need to go back a bit. At the beginning of Luke’s long section of Jesus sayings and actions, Jesus sent out 70 of his followers to the towns and villages he would visit on his way to Jerusalem. Their commission was to heal the sick and say, “The kingdom of God has come near you” (Luke 10:9). They were clear that, whatever else this advance-party business was about, they were about healing, and they did so in Jesus’ name, having made the connection between Jesus and the kingdom of God coming near.

Luke records that when they reported back joyfully, Jesus rejoiced as well and prayed “in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will’” (10:21). Now whatever else one might say, we would probably be right to assume that there were smiles enough to go around. After all, it worked!

I like to think Jesus was laughing with delight when he prayed, “I thank thee, Father . . .” Stage directions for reading this would perhaps indicate that the laughter here is the laughter of relief, not laughter *at* a person, but laughter *with* a person—in this case, laughter among the members of the Trinity. The healing was entrusted to people, and they did it! No wonder Jesus had that strange vision earlier, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18).

So here Jesus is, on his way to Jerusalem to meet his end at the cross, and ten lepers call out to him, using his name and asking for mercy. Jesus seems preoccupied, and tells them to show themselves to the priests. “Right,” say the ten, and they shuffle offstage and are cured. When the Samaritan—now an ex-leper—turns back, surely Jesus realizes what has happened. The whole bunch has been cured of leprosy, and that’s no mean feat. The strange power of this peculiar sickness was so strong that all people could do was recommend that they be warned when it was near.

And this power had been put down and a new power was near. It was enough to make him smile, perhaps even laugh. Not only can the 70 do it; these poor lepers can do it! It seems to me his comments to the one who turned back are not a condemnation of the other nine, or some sort of commentary on ungrateful Jews and

the humility of the foreigner, but an amused, delighted, smiling and soon-to-be-laughing reaction to wonderful news. The whole of this little snippet of conversation should be read, I suggest, as an explosive delighted laugh, the laugh of triumph over a great evil.

And perhaps the last sentence should be read as a triumphal proclamation of what has happened: "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." And it should be said with a smile, for after all it is something to make us smile, laugh and dance.