The text for the sermon this morning is written in the seventeenth verse of the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke: "Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?"

That may be one of the saddest questions our Lord asks in the Gospels. Ten men had stood at a distance and cried out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." – Ten men had been living with a disease that separated them from their families, their communities, and the ordinary life everyone else took for granted. – Ten asked for mercy. – Ten received it. – And only one came back.

It would be easy to make this simply a sermon about remembering to say thank you. Certainly, gratitude is part of it. But I think our Lord's question goes deeper than good manners. "Where are the nine?" asks us what happens to faith after the crisis has passed.

There is nothing wrong with crying out to God when we are in trouble. The ten lepers did exactly that, and Christ heard them. – When someone is sick, frightened, grieving, worried about a child, uncertain about a job, or waiting for news from a doctor, prayer can suddenly become very important. – Someone who has

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not been inside a church for some time may find himself praying again. – Someone who has allowed faith to drift toward the edges of life may suddenly remember how much he needs God. – And that can be a great mercy. Sometimes a crisis is the very thing that wakes us up and turns us back toward Christ.

The danger is what comes afterward. – When the test comes back clear. – When the treatment works. – When the family problem begins to settle. – When the financial worry eases. – When life becomes normal again – and somehow the urgency we felt in prayer begins to disappear with the crisis. – Perhaps that helps us understand the nine.

We're not told that they became wicked men. – We're not told that they rejected Christ or denied that He had healed them. – Perhaps they simply went back to their lives – and who could blame them for wanting to? – They had been separated from normal life, and now suddenly everything was open to them again. – The had families to see – homes to return to – work to resume – plans to make.

But in receiving their lives back, nine of them forgot to return to the One who had given those lives back to them.

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St. Cyril of Alexandria noticed precisely this. He says that the nine fell into what he calls a "thankless forgetfulness." – The Samaritan, on the other hand, recognized what had happened, returned, glorified God, and fell at the feet of Jesus. – The difference was not that one received more mercy than the others. – All ten were cleansed. – The difference was what that mercy produced in him.

And that brings us to the Collect this morning. In it we prayed, "Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity." – Those words may sound particularly familiar to those of us who participate in the Rosary on the first Sunday of the month – as the first three Hail Marys are offered for an increase of faith, hope, and charity. – There is wisdom in praying for an increase.

The Church does not assume that because we have faith today, it cannot weaken tomorrow. – She does not assume that hope never grows faint, or that charity cannot cool. – We need these things strengthened. – We need them deepened. – We need God continually to increase them within us.

The ten lepers had faith enough to cry, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." – They had faith enough to obey when Jesus told

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them, "Go shew yourselves unto the priests." And so, St. Luke tells us that "as they went, they were cleansed." – But only one had the faith that turned around and brought him back to the feet of Christ.

And that then gives us a useful question – Does our faith only carry us to Christ when we need something? – Or does it bring us back to Christ when we have received it?

Our Lord describes a similar danger in the Parable of the Sower. – As we remember, some seed falls among thorns. It begins to grow, but the thorns grow with it. St. Luke tells us that these are those in whom the Word is eventually choked by "cares and riches and pleasures of this life."

Notice that it does not necessarily take some dramatic rejection of God to choke faith. – Sometimes life simply gets busy again. – There are bills to pay, children to care for, work to do, places to go, entertainment to enjoy, plans to make. – None of those things is necessarily sinful. – But little by little they can take up so much room – that God is pushed back toward the edges.

The person who prayed every night during the crisis begins missing a night here and there. – The person who returned faithfully to Mass – suddenly finds Sunday crowded again. – The

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person who promised, "Lord, if you get me through this, things will be different," – discovers that things are becoming very much as they were before.

The thorns do not always arrive looking evil. – Sometimes they simply look like ordinary life. – The world, the flesh, and the devil do not always draw us away through some spectacular temptation. – Sometimes the world simply becomes so noisy and so busy – that we stop hearing the things of God.

And that is one reason St. Paul tells us in the Epistle this morning to "Walk in the Spirit." – Notice the idea of continuing movement. – He does not say, 'Have one spiritual moment.' He says, "Walk." A walk continues – one step after another after another.

St. Paul then contrasts "the works of the flesh" with "the fruit of the Spirit." By "flesh," he is not saying that the human body itself is evil. St. John Chrysostom points out that many things on St. Paul's list – hatred, envy, strife, jealousy – are clearly not merely bodily things. St. Paul is describing fallen human life turned inward and ruled by sinful desires rather than by the Spirit of God.

And notice the word St. Paul chooses on the other side of that contrast: fruit. – Fruit is the result of something living and

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healthy at work. – It does not ordinarily appear spontaneously – it develops, matures, and becomes visible over time. – And so St. Paul tells us what begins to appear in a life that is being led by the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." – Those things do not normally appear in us fully grown overnight. – They grow as the Holy Ghost continues His work within us and as we continue to walk with Him.

And that takes us right back to the Collect, "Give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity."

Increase. – Growth. – Walking. – Continuing.

The Christian life is not meant to consist of occasional emergencies in which we rush toward God and then return to life as though He were no longer needed.

We need Him when we are sick – and when we are well. – We need Him when the news is bad – and when the news is good. – We need Him when we are frightened – and when life is so comfortable that we are tempted to forget that we need Him at all.

Perhaps that is why the Samaritan is so important. Because he does something very simple – he turns back. – He recognizes

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that being healed is not the end of the story. The mercy he has received leads him back to the One who showed the mercy. – St. Luke tells us that he falls down at Jesus' feet, giving Him thanks.

There is a Eucharistic lesson there for us as well, because the very word Eucharist means thanksgiving. – We come to the altar not merely because we need something from God – although we certainly do – but because the Christian life is a continual returning to God in thanksgiving for the mercy we have already received.

We come because Christ has forgiven us – because He has called us – because He feeds us with His own Body and Blood – because He has carried us through things we once wondered whether we could endure – and because every good thing we possess – and ultimately every hope we have beyond this life – comes through Him.

And so the question of Jesus remains before us – "Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?"

Where are we when the crisis is over? – Where are we when the prayer has been answered? – Where are we when life becomes ordinary again?

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The answer we want to give is the answer of the Samaritan – back at the feet of Jesus. – Giving thanks. – Glorifying God. – Walking in the Spirit. – Asking Him to increase in us faith, hope, and charity, so that the cares of this life do not choke what He has planted within us.

And perhaps that is a good prayer for us this morning – Lord, do not simply bring me through the crisis – use it to bring me closer to Thee. And when the crisis has passed, give me the grace not to forget the One who heard me when I cried – "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

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