

Sermon: Pentecost 21

Mr. Evans DeVries

October 9, 2016

Year C

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

Today's gospel reading is about several things. It is about mercy and inclusion for the marginalized. It is about faith and gratitude and discerning God's gifts.

Jesus has, as it says in Luke 9:51, "set his face toward Jerusalem" and his death. The route that he follows, according to Luke is not a direct one. Martin Luther noted this in his sermon on this passage of scripture delivered in 1521. Luther says, "Now, this was not the direct road from Capernaum to Jerusalem. For Galilee is north of Jerusalem and Samaria is south of Galilee... which was a tiresome, far and circuitous route." By going this way, Luther goes on to say, Jesus had the opportunity to reach and serve more people. In doing so, He wasn't only crossing political boundaries between countries, but, in reaching out to Samaritans, He was crossing social boundaries, as well.

As He enters a town, He is approached, at least as far as they could approach, by a group of ten lepers. They call out begging to be healed. Jesus had very recently healed a leper in a nearby town, as reported in Luke 5. This group had undoubtedly heard of that healing and hoped to be recipients of Christ's mercy, themselves. Pastor Meda Stamper of Leicestershire, England reminds us that cleansing lepers is a signature mark of Christ's ministry. As He says in Luke 7: 22, "Go and tell John the lepers have been cleansed." She continues, " This episode also evokes the story of Naaman the Syrian, the Old Testament lectionary text for today, which Jesus mentions in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4:27. His attention to outsiders and marginalized people is evident from the start, and he highlights it in that speech, in response to which his hometown audience tries to throw him off a cliff. Here, as in the story of Naaman the Syrian, the recipient of healing and grace is a foreigner (although in an interesting twist we find that, in the case of Naaman, the prophet Elisha is from Samaria). The cleansing of the ten is

also a bit unusual, in that, like Naaman, there is no direct touching of the lepers by Jesus, nor is the actual healing described as in the earlier cleansing of the leper in Luke 5.

Here, Jesus commands the lepers to go and show themselves to the priests to be certified clean and make their thanks offerings according to the law. One of the ten, a Samaritan, notices that he has been healed and returns to Jesus to thank him. This prompts Jesus to ask what happened to the others, since ten were healed. David Lose, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia says of this, "Given that Jesus has commanded the ten to follow the law, the question seems a tad disingenuous: 'Where are the other nine?' To which one might answer, 'They are going to show themselves to the priests in accordance with the law...just like you told them to'." It would appear that given the lack of detail about the healing and the fact that there is no further mention of the ten going to the priests, this is not really a story about healing or obedience.

What, then, are we to make of this?

The last part of today's gospel reading gets into some of the grammatical and vocabulary choice areas that I am not qualified to enter, given my continual struggle with English and total lack of background in the languages of the first century Middle East. The gist of it is this. Jesus says to the tenth leper "Your faith has made you well." 'Well' can also be translated as David Lose says, as 'healed', 'saved', and 'made whole'. What ever the choice, it is greater than just cleansing. So, what did this foreigner get that the nine others did not? Or, what was different about the Samaritan's reaction?

A relatively small group of commentators address this using somewhat different words to get to the same idea. They say that what made the tenth leper different was that he recognized the gift he had been given beyond just being cleansed. Some commentators

use the word "see". He saw what happened, what had been done for him. Because he recognized it, he was grateful for God's favor.

I know that it is true for me, and I suspect that it may be true for some of you, as well. I am seduced by routine. I fall into a pattern of taking God's gifts and God's mercy for granted. I have become so used to a roof over my head and a warm place to sleep, more than enough food to eat, and most importantly the love and kindness of my family and my friends, that I take that for granted, too. It's like I don't see all those wonderful things any more. They become the backdrop for what is happening at the moment. Occasionally, things come along to break that open and I become very aware.

We were very close to ground zero in the August 20th tornado that went through Wyoming. Still, today, there are two houses within a few hundred feet of our house that are uninhabitable. There are four or five houses with the blue tarps and two by fours nailed to the roofs to keep the weather out within a thousand feet of our house. We were very blessed. Everyone in my family was safe and unhurt. My daughter and her family who lives about a mile from us were fine. They had no damage at all. Outside of some pretty good sized branches down in my yard, we were unscathed. We were without power for about 24 hours, but beyond that and being briefly blocked in by huge trees across the only road into and out of our neighborhood we were fine. At that point, believe me, I was vividly aware of God's gift of "normal". But, what's sad is that I am already returning to having an absolute expectation that when I hit the switch, the light will come on. For weeks after the storm, there was this little feeling of gratitude when I flipped the switch and the light came on, but try as I might to preserve it, that feeling is gradually slipping away as "normal" returns.

It is precisely that seduction of the routine, of the "normal" that our United Thank Offering strives to disrupt, and thanks to Lisbeth Eichner for spearheading that program. I remember a sheet that was given out during a UTO awareness campaign that suggested some of these "normal" things that we could consider for which to be

thankful. I remember the suggestion of being thankful for each electric outlet, maybe, in my case, I should say "functioning" electrical outlet, in your home.

Of course, more than being thankful for the "stuff" that God has given us, it is the people that He has placed in our lives that truly enrich us and make our lives livable and enjoyable and meaningful. Our family and friends are the greatest gifts that God can give us in this life. When people are the gifts God has given us, there is another level of thanks involved. Not only do we need to thank God for those in our lives, but we must remember to thank those people for what they do to enhance our lives. For example, it's the innumerable things that my wife does for me and our family, her very presence, that is the linchpin of our quality of life. I really do thank God for her presence in my life everyday. Sadly, there are times when that myriad of kindnesses can become part of the routine, of the ordinary, of "normal", and I forget to thank her for all that she does for us. I try to be mindful of that fact, but I am not always successful. Scott Hoezee from Calvin College's Center for Excellence in Preaching points out that "to say, 'Thank You to certain people would be to admit that maybe what we're getting in life is less an accomplishment and more part and parcel of the larger gift of God." And that really is the point, isn't it? Look around. All that you see is God's gift to us, but do we see it as that or is it just the "same old, same old" backdrop of life. The Samaritan saw his second chance for what it was: a gift from God and he was grateful. He wasn't just grateful to be cleansed. He was grateful that God chose to give that gift to him. I wish that I could say that every day I was like that. I try. Sometimes, I am like that. I do keep trying, though.

According to David Lose, someone once asked Martin Luther to describe the nature of true worship. He answered: The tenth leper turning back.