

Giving Thanks
November 19, 2017

Scripture:

Luke 17: 11 On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. 12 And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance 13 and lifted their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” 14 When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; 16 and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now, he was a Samaritan. 17 Then said Jesus, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? 18 Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” 19 And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” (RSV)

May God bless the hearing of His holy word. Amen.

This is a familiar passage. I’ve heard Rev. Zanicky use it several times, and, as you can see in the Bulletin, it’s what he was planning to use today. With good reason. It is a scripture about giving thanks, and we are preparing for that great American holiday, Thanksgiving. So, as we give thanks, let us consider this story.

First, a bit of context. I’m sure you have all heard of the disease leprosy. It isn’t a common issue for most of us. As I was growing up, I had heard about it. One of the missions of the Presbyterian Church in the Congo, where my grandparents served, was to the lepers, still not uncommon in that place. But that was remote from me and my life. I didn’t really understand.

“Lockjaw,” or Tetanus, was a different story. When my sister and I as young children visited my grandmother in the hospital, we were told that her room-mate was suffering from lockjaw. The poor lady never said anything, and seemed inert. We had both been warned about “lockjaw” after getting cuts or punctures, and had endured the pain of a hypodermic needle afterwards. But from then on both my sister and I lived somewhat in fear of lockjaw. Whenever my jaw felt sore, I’d work it a bit, thinking, “Am I getting lockjaw?” That extra work made my jaw stiffer, and didn’t help my fears. Of course, I never breathed a word about this to anyone; certainly not my parents. Mentioning it might make it real.

In the ancient world, leprosy was very real, and a deadly and immediate threat. It was a disease that caused disfigurement, depriving a person of his or her appearance as a normal human being. Lepers were not allowed to take part in normal commerce, or even live normally with their families. They were banned as unclean. The threat to others was real. Nobody really understood disease at that time. Lepers were required to stay away from others, lest they contaminate them with their uncleanness, which was understood as being a consequence of sinfulness. They were required to shout “Unclean! Unclean!” as a warning to others, as they made their way about.

Jesus encounters these ten lepers as he makes his way from Galilee to Jerusalem. He chose to go through Samaria. Most Jews from Galilee didn’t. They’d take a long detour across

the Jordan river, travel down the East bank to a point opposite Jericho, then re-cross, and travel the steep and dangerous road up to Jerusalem. The Samaria route was shorter, and less demanding. But, that route had a different problem: the Samaritans.

If you asked a first century Jew what people they hated most, they might well answer, “Samaritans.” There was a long history of conflict. When the exiles from Judah returned from Babylon, and started rebuilding the Temple, Samaritans were the people living in the land. They had come to Israel when the Assyrians did ethnic cleansing and shipped out the Israelites, and settled the country with exiles from other places. Those people became the Samaritans, and practiced a religion that was closely related to that of the Jews. Indeed, they had their own version of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. But they worshiped God on Mount Gerizim, not Mount Zion in Jerusalem. When the Jews returned, the Samaritans offered to help them rebuild the temple, saying,

Ezra 4:2b “Let us build with you; for we worship your God as you d, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Essar-haddon king of Assyria who brought us here.”

But the leaders of the returning exiles replied,
Ezra 4:3 b “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, ...”

They were concerned that the Law be kept strictly. The error of accommodating Canaanite pagan practices was to be firmly prohibited.

As you can imagine, that didn’t go over well. There was conflict as the Samaritans tried to frustrate the rebuilding of the temple, and later the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. Still later, a century or so before Jesus, the Jews during the Maccabean period destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, near the city of Shechem (modern Nablus). The Jews made the destruction date a holiday. That didn’t help community relations either. So, a good Jew would not want to venture into Samaria, any more than you’d want to venture into a bad part of a big city today.

But Jesus did. He and his disciples traveled to Jerusalem via Samaria. And just at the border, as they were entering a village, here were ten lepers: a Samaritan and nine others, presumably Jews. I think it is interesting that the Samaritan leper was associating with the Jewish lepers. These in distress cannot afford hostility. Their focus is on survival, and the possibility of relief. They did know the rules. They kept their distance. But they begged, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

Jesus has been preaching and teaching in Galilee. No doubt word of Jesus, his message, and especially his healing, had reached these lepers. They know who he is. They have heard of his healing others. Can he; will he, do the same for them? They have come out of their way, even dared to come close to this village, in hopes that this Jesus will “have mercy” on them.

Jesus heals them. He says, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” The process Jesus prescribes is in the Mosaic law, in Leviticus chapter 14. But this point is interesting: Why “priests”, the plural? Jesus understood that they would necessarily go in different directions: the Jewish lepers to Jerusalem, and the Samaritan to a Samaritan priest. Jesus’s mercy was wide enough for all of them, Samaritan and Jew alike. Luke tells us, “And as they went, they were cleansed.” All ten received the miracle of healing.

At this point, we might pause to consider all of the lepers that did not receive healing from Jesus. How was this fair? Why did some receive healing, and others did not? Indeed, at the beginning of his ministry, when Jesus returned to his home town of Nazareth, he cited that in the time of the prophet Elisha there were many lepers in Israel. But only a Syrian, as detestable in that day as a Samaritan was later, was cleansed by God’s grace in a miracle of healing. Why do some receive healing and others do not? Is this not a question we often ask, even in our day?

We don’t have the answers. We can but give thanks for the healing that is received. From the perspective history gives us, we can see that purpose of Jesus’s ministry was not to establish better health care in Palestine. The miracles were a sign of God’s power, and God’s love. A remarkable and dramatic illustration that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Indeed, the words “sign.” and “miracle.” are often used interchangeably in the gospels.

So, the lepers hustle off, marveling at their healing, in obedience to Jesus’s instructions to go to the priests. So, why did only one, the Samaritan, return to thank Jesus? Why did not the nine Jewish lepers? We can’t really know. Perhaps they felt bound by a strict literalism. If they disobeyed, by not continuing directly to a priest, but returning, would perhaps the spell be broken, and their disease would return? They would not want to put their healing at risk. Perhaps something else was at work. As my grandfather would say when I asked such questions after hearing stories, he’d say, “The page is torn off there.” We can’t know.

We shift our gaze to the one who returned. “When he saw that he was healed, he turned back, praising God with a loud voice. Now he was a Samaritan.” Maybe the Samaritans were not as concerned with legalism as the Jews. Maybe his path to the priest more closely corresponded to Jesus’s own journey. I like to suppose that he did not stop to consider, but was so overcome with gratitude, that he could do no other.

Jesus pauses to wonder about the other nine, but then says, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

That’s the end of our scripture reading, but it’s not the end of the message. Because, you see, all ten were healed. All ten had faith; all ten followed that faith to an encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. All ten received Jesus’s words, and all ten were obedient, acting on their faith. All ten received the miraculous healing, lifting a sentence of separateness and alienation from their futures. All ten received a clear sign that Jesus had come from God, and carried an important message, which we know as the gospel story. To the one who returned, an extra blessing was received. But, as far as what lay in the future for these ten, the page is torn off there. We cannot know how these may have carried the message of God’s love through Jesus into their families, their communities, and into the world.

So, in looking back at this encounter between Jesus and the ten lepers, it is tempting to dwell on the apparent ungratefulness of the nine. But that misses the miracle of healing and God's love for all ten. A love that knows of our limitations and failures and sinfulness, even the failure to give thanks sometimes for the blessings that we receive. For in the miracle of Jesus's ministry, sacrifice and resurrection, we have God's offer of forgiveness for all of our transgressions. Just as we recited, after our prayer of confession today, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

I love the words of Jeremiah, speaking from about six centuries before Jesus, anticipating a new Covenant. In Jeremiah 31:31 he writes,

31:31 "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the lord. 33 But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

We have ever so much to be thankful for. We have so much more, in so many ways than our forebears. But there is one blessing for which we can offer thanks to God with all who receive the gospel message. We have God's love and grace through Jesus Christ. For in Christ, God will forgive our iniquity, and remember our sins no more.

Amen.