

Sermon: “Were There Not Ten?”

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “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?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

“Your faith has made you well” is one of those verses from scripture that has done as much harm as it has good. On the one hand, many have given joyful thanks to God after recovering from an illness or an accident. Just as many do not recover, even though they have prayed just as hard and just as often, maybe even harder and more often. Is the problem with their prayers? Some assume their prayers are inferior if they do not “work”, but perhaps the problem is with their understanding of faith. Often Christians think of faith as being all about cause and effect – you pray for something, and it either happens or it does not happen. There is good news, Jesus points to a more profound understanding of faith in this story about the ten lepers who are healed. In this narrative, the actual healing is almost a sideline event. Jesus does it without fanfare. We do not know where nine of the ten go, but we do know that this one – a foreigner, and a despised one at that – comes back to bow down at Jesus’ feet, to worship and to give thanks.

It is difficult to know what tone Jesus uses as he questions the whereabouts of the other nine. Is he sad? Angry? Flabbergasted? What he does make clear is that this most unlikely one, this double outcast, has been embraced by grace. “Get up and go” he says, “your faith has made you well.”

Jesus and company are walking to Jerusalem in “the region between Samaria and Galilee” (v.11). The word “Samaria” is itself a red flag, of course Observant Jews did not go anywhere near Samaria or the Samaritans. Samaritans were a despised group, culturally inferior, theologically and liturgically heretics.

On the way to Jerusalem, near Samaria, Jesus and his disciples encounter ten men with leprosy. It is difficult to exaggerate the social alienation and isolation of these ten men. People lived in dread of leprosy, a loosely defined term used to describe any skin blemishes or eruption that looked suspicious. What we call Hansen’s disease is treatable today, but in Jesus’ time it was thought to be radically contagious.

Skin blemishes could also be an indication of liturgical uncleanness. The result was that people with leprosy lived in total isolation; banished from their homes, from the loving touch of their spouses, children, parents, from their faith community – so feared that even to cross a shadow of one with leprosy was to risk infection. They lived alone, away from the community. Sometimes they banded together to become a small company of misery.

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (v.13) they call to him, and Jesus does. Luke provides no description of a physical healing, perhaps to suggest a deeper sort of healing. Jesus says, “Go and show yourselves to the priests” (v.14), the ones who could certify that the leprosy is gone, and the person is fit once again for normal human relationships. On the way to the priests for verification, they are made clean. Nine keep right on walking or run or skip to show the priests. One, a Samaritan, stops in his tracks, runs back to find Jesus, falls on his face at Jesus’ feet, and thanks him.

Jesus inquires about the other nine; “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine where are they?” (v.17).

Then he says a very interesting thing to the one grateful man at his feet; “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” What does that mean? Was there something about this man that was more well, healthier, than the other nine? Apparently. Does this gratitude have something to do with his faith?

Apparently.

We might observe how uninterested Jesus seems to be in the man’s religion. We know only that he is a Samaritan. We do not know what his theology or moral values are – whether he is pro-choice or pro-life, how

he votes or spends his sabbath. All we really know about him is that he recognized a gift when he saw and experienced it, that he returned to say, “Thank You”, and that Jesus said to him, “Your faith has made you well.” That is surely to say that by Jesus’ definition, faith and gratitude are very closely related, that faith without gratitude is not faith at all, and there is something life giving about gratitude. We might observe that this man’s wellness is more than being rid of some dreadful disease. Biblical scholars point out the way the Bible uses the concepts of wellness, wholeness, and salvation almost interchangeably. “Your faith has made you well / made you whole / saved you.”

Being grateful and saying thank you are absolutely at the heart of God’s hope for the human race and God’s intent for each of us.

There is evidence that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. There is new evidence that grateful people, for whom gratitude is a permanent trait, have a health edge. It may be that grateful people take better care of themselves, but there is evidence that gratitude alone is a stress reducer, that grateful people are more hopeful, and that there are links between gratitude and the immune system. So, your mother was right when she made you call up your grandmother and thank her for that birthday card.

The basic Christian response to God is gratitude: gratitude for the gift of life, gratitude for the world, gratitude for the dear people God has given us to enrich and grace our lives. The basic Christian experience is gratitude to God for God’s love in Jesus Christ and the accompanying gift of hopeful confidence and wholeness and wellness that comes with it, regardless of the worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give our thanks and praise. Eternal God, Holy and mighty, it is truly right and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise, and worship you in every place where your glory abides.

This is the eucharistic prayer and central liturgical part of presbyterian worship. There is one like it in almost every Christian denomination. These words of the Great Thanksgiving symbolize every part of Christian living.

PRAYER:

Merciful God, in Jesus you do not call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance. Draw us away from the easy road that leads to destruction and guide us into paths that lead to life abundant, that in seeking your truth, and obeying your will, we may know the joy of being a disciple of Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN

BENEDICTION:

Once again, we hear Jesus telling us not to be concerned with the quantity of faith – whether we have enough, that is, to make our prayers work, as if faith was a matter of cause and effect. Rather Jesus is teaching us about the nature of faith. In short, to “have faith” is to live it, and to live it is to give thanks. It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith – this is the grateful sort of faith that has made the man from Samaria truly and deeply well.