

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.  
Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church  
Richmond, Virginia  
October 9, 2016  
Pentecost XXI

***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."*

Several years ago I was hiking on the Appalachian Trail with a friend. He was new to the trail and I really wanted everything to go well. It didn't!

The very first night out, as the sun was setting, we walked into the designated camp site for the night...and the spring...the one designated in the guidebook as "year round"...was completely dry.

My friend had no water, having drunk it all on the hike up. I had about a third of a liter. So, we shared it and settled down to a thirsty night.

We hoped the guidebook was right about the next spring, which was about five miles away. We got up the next morning and set out. We were pretty quiet and a bit worried as we walked along. What if the next spring fails too?!

After a couple of hours we came to a trail marker, which indicated that a spring was just down a side trail, about a quarter of a mile. So down we went...and...yes!!! There was an awesome spring there.

We stayed there forever...drinking ice cold, delicious, life giving water. It was one of those times in my life that I was just filled with gratitude and thanksgiving. It was spontaneous and glorious. Every drop was precious.

Now, contrast that with me in the kitchen of my home. I am standing there, with a glass in my hand and I reach out and move the lever...out comes water and my glass is filled.

The phone rings...and I try to turn the water off...but don't quite get it all the way off...so it is running a bit...and I go to answer the phone. I come back in, realize the water has been running...I've been wasteful but I don't really think about it as I drain the glass, put it down and fully cut the water off. Then I am off to the next thing, without a thought.

Two completely different experiences really, of drinking some water. In my home, I take things for granted. I am detached from the astonishing fact that whenever I am thirsty...all I have to do is this...move the lever, and I can quench my thirst. Out on the trail, I am in touch with just how wonderful water is and how grateful I am for it. Either way...water...having it, drinking it...is a blessing. Sometimes I just forget that.

Now...I have to ask myself...where would I really like to spend my life...emotionally and spiritually? In awe and wonder and gratitude? Or, out of touch, entitled, and even wasteful?

We can see some of these dynamics playing out in the gospel reading for today. There is a lot going on in this story about ten lepers.

Leprosy was a frightening disease, and in the ancient near east, in addition to physical torment, the disease led to abandonment and isolation. The

Torah required “any person with a leprosy to live ‘outside the camp’ (Num 5:2-3) and to cry out ‘Unclean, unclean’ whenever anyone approached (Lev 13:45-46). If a leper (was) fortunate enough to recover, a priest had to certify that the person was clean before he or she could return to the community (Lev 14:23).”<sup>1</sup>

In the story, Jesus enters a village and encounters this band of leprous outcasts. In accordance with the Law, they keep their distance. But they do cry out, “Master have mercy.” Jesus tells them to go to the priest...which as you know...the priest could certify a cure. All ten had faith enough to set out for the priest...even though they weren’t healed in the moment of their leaving. They had faith to set out, and...on their way...they were made clean.

One of the healed lepers returns to Jesus to thank him. It turns out the one who returned was an outcast amongst outcasts.

You know how family fights can be the absolute worst sometimes? You know how Protestants and Roman Catholics have gone after each other sometimes? Those on the outside would just see two Christian entities fighting one another. But inside a sectarian conflict, all anybody can see is the differences. Thus the Samaritans and the Jews.

Samaritans can actually be thought of as a “conservative group within the total spectrum of Judaism.”<sup>2</sup> They had a version of the Torah. They had a holy place on the mountain... they venerated Mount Gerizim rather than Mount Zion or Jerusalem...so that is a difference. But there was a lot of overlap.

At any rate, they had outsider status...a status Jesus alludes to when he calls the Samaritan a foreigner. But where Jesus is concerned, that status makes

---

<sup>1</sup> The New Interpreter’s Bible, volume IX, page 325.

<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Companion to the Bible ed. Metzger, Coogan, page 671ff.

no difference. Jesus is creating a new humanity, breaking down the dividing walls of hostility. As I said, there is a lot going on in this reading.

But surely, the whole idea of gratitude and thanksgiving is a main point of the story.

The Samaritan turns back, praises God with a loud voice, throws himself at Jesus' feet and thanks Jesus. Jesus, after wondering where the rest are, says to the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you."

I know...the NRSV translation says "Your faith has made you well." But the Greek phrase is used several times in Luke, and in other places, the exact same Greek words<sup>3</sup> are translated, "Your faith has saved you." I think that is the best translation here.

All ten lepers had faith that they would be healed. They showed this faith by setting out to find the priest. Something more is going on with the one who returned.

His faith has not only led to healing. His faith has saved him...brought him into a relationship with God that he didn't have before. "The other nine had been healed, but only this one received Jesus' declaration of salvation. They got what they wanted, but this one received more than he dreamed of asking for."<sup>4</sup>

One commentator asks "Does not gratitude follow from faith? Or is gratitude itself an expression of faith? If gratitude reveals humility of spirit and a sensitivity to the grace of God in one's life, then is there any better measure of faith than wonder and thankfulness before what one perceives as unmerited expressions of love and kindness from God and from others."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> See 7:50; 8:48; 18:42 in the Greek and in various translations.

<sup>4</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX, page 327.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

I can be that person on the Appalachian Trail, reveling in and grateful for every single sip of cool, spring water. Or I can mindlessly let the water run in the kitchen. I can be that healed leper, returning, shouting praise, falling at Jesus' feet and giving thanks. Or I can just keep moving away accepting God's goodness as my due.

The truth of the matter is this: Everyone has received life from God's hand...it is the one who is mindful, who returns and gives thanks ...that one moves into a whole new relationship with God, that one is saved, healed, made whole. That one lives life as a joyous, generous, grateful fool for Christ. That's who I want to be! I want to be that one. I bet you do to. The choice is ours to make...thanks be to God. Amen.