

Sermon - 23C

Jeremiah 29.1, 4-7 or 2 Kings 5.1-3, 7-15c; Psalm 66.1-11 or Psalm 111, 2 Timothy 2.8-15
and Luke 17:11-19

We are blessed, and we are grateful.

This is the message of the leper this morning. And, this is the message chosen by Joe O'Dell, our Stewardship Chairperson, for this year. You will be seeing that message in the materials that you receive over the next few weeks as we begin to discern what our expenditures will be for next year and how we will provide funding.

We are blessed and we are grateful.

In our reading from Kings this morning, it would appear that the mighty Naaman suffered from leprosy. When he appeared before Elisha, the prophet, he expected to be treated according to his rank, yet he was greeted by a messenger with a simple message, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." Haughty Naaman became enraged, insisting that he should have been treated with more dignity and that the waters of his own home were better than those in Israel. Yet, his servants urged him to do this simple thing, reminding him that were the task

even more challenging he would have done it. And Naaman followed the instructions and became clean. Upon recognition of the power of this healing process, he returned and acknowledged the power of the God of Israel. In his acknowledgement he realized that he had been blessed and was grateful.

Psalm 111, as we sang this morning, could, indeed, have been sung by Naaman and reflects blessings and gratitude. I wonder if, over the next several weeks, we might reflect our own gratitude to God by writing our own version of how we might be thankful. (If you do this, please share, as I would love to publish in our weekly newsletter!)

And Paul continues to remind us of our God, the God who remains faithful to us even though we may be faithless. Yet another reason to be grateful.

And then from our Gospel of Luke today we hear “Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.”

Let us go back in time for a moment and consider that Samaritan leper. The scene is in that area where Samaria and Galilee meet. It is also the place where healing and gratitude meet.

Historically, Samaritans had moved into that area when the Jews who had been captured by the Assyrians, were removed to become slaves in another land. Samaritans were bitter enemies of the Jews. Yet these people married Jews still living in that land known as Samaria. This meant that they were “compromised” ... and were not to be associated with by the Jewish population.

Yet, disease, like poverty and other issues, can be a great leveler, as we discovered at the height of the pandemic. In this case, leprosy separated people from their families, from their livelihoods, from their communities and from their spiritual bases as well.

Lepers were outcasts. Outcasts ban together. In this case, it appears as though their illness was their common thread and it

was more essential that they stick together rather than be separated by religion.

Priests, in those days, were given the power to judge someone ritually clean or unclean in that time. Priests were authorized to reunite the lepers to their families and communities and overall well-being. As this band of ten left Jesus, they were healed and on the way to the priests for confirmation of healing. Only one turned back. The Samaritan.

If you stop to think about it, chances are pretty slim that the Samaritan leper would continue on to a priest. Bitter enemies with the Jews, that would have done him no good. In his healing, he turned back. He chose Jesus. He showed his gratitude God through Jesus.

What a powerful gesture.

Luke, a Gentile himself, tells us over and over of the intention of Jesus was here for all of us, bar none.

This is a story of one outsider, a cast off ... a leper, who, in return to an invitation from God to all humankind, turned back and chose Jesus. The Samaritan was blessed and he was grateful.

I'm certain that many of us have heard and share healing stories. I share a couple of more this morning.

James, the grandson of a friend, had been severely burned in an accident. The week before, things had not gone well. However, one week later there was a major turnaround and James was released from the hospital, a full month before such action had been anticipated. He returned to work within a two month period. Connie, his mother, wrote "You'd better believe in miracles because we are experiencing one today. ... I know in my heart and soul it is because of all the thoughts and prayers that have been lifted up for James and his family, Michelle and her family, me and my family! Thank you friends and family! My heart is humbled by the support we have received."

Another miracle.

A friend of mine had to go to the hospital due to hemorrhaging in the membrane surrounding the brain. It would be necessary to drain the blood from this membrane. Very scary operation. On the night that I visited Joe, or rather at 1:55 the next morning I was awakened with the need to watch, and pray and weep and keep vigil with my friend as he faced this difficult challenge. The last time I looked at my watch it was 3:15 and I don't know how much longer I was awake with him.

The next day I shared this incident with another colleague. She said, "that's strange. The same thing happened to me. I was awakened at 1:55 a.m. as well and knew that I was being called to pray for our mutual friend." The operation took place with a very successful outcome and our friend returned to his home a few days later. When my friend shared "our" story with the Joe's daughter she said, "I spent the night in my dad's room and it was at 1:55 in the morning that the pain was at its worst."

I could only respond, "Thank you, Lord."

God continues to heal. God continues to bless. God uses us and our prayers to heal. God uses, especially when we share our stories of thanksgiving with others for God's faithfulness. God is with us. Christ is with us. The mystery of God surrounds us each and every day and ... somewhere in this world of ours ... manifests itself so that others, like the leper can turn back and praise God.

Let us be prepared for service ... prepared for the time God calls upon us to act in his behalf. Let us act, out of total gratitude and generosity and joy for the love shown to us by the one who created us .. and who through that act continue to show his love and mercy to others.

Let us share our stories of God's love to one another and to our friends and neighbors who may not have yet experienced God's love, so that they, too, through his love in us, will be able to say, "We are blessed and we are grateful." Amen.