

Thanksgiving A Luke 17:11-19

“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.”

There is something about the story of the lepers in the gospel of Luke that sounds rather like being in church. Ten people face Jesus, and ten voices call his name and cry, “Have mercy!” and ten people hear the news of cleansing.

One of them sings a doxology and bows for Eucharist (thanksgiving) at Jesus feet. Then comes a benediction: “Rise and go.” And then they leave. Somewhat close to our weekly experience, isn’t it?

The story of the lepers sort of mimics a liturgy, an order of worship, which when you think about it is rather odd, because hardly any house of worship would have them, these lepers. Just like the culture, congregations are not very often passionate in wanting the unclean.

The ten lepers stand for all those who have lost membership in society. They wander on the borders of life, outside the village, outside the norm, as Luke puts it, “in the region between.”

On the face of it, Luke tells a rather simple story here. Jesus is on the road headed south toward Jerusalem. However, at the moment he is working the east-west border between Samaria and Galilee, which doesn’t make much sense geographically, but perhaps Luke has something else in mind. The context may well have something to do with the story.

Luke places Jesus in the breach, in an unclaimed region. The point is not just about geography, but also about norms and prejudices.

And there, in that 'no place,' in some unnamed village, ten lepers, keeping their distance, lament, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" And immediately, to their cry of "Have mercy!" Jesus answers, "Go!" Sending them to show themselves to the priest who has the authority to certify their cleanness and permit them to reintegrate back into society.

Jesus seems to skip the pastoral care. And instead, with a shock of sternness, he honors their petition with a command, conferring on them the dignity of being partners in their own healing.

They respond, they accept, they obey, and off they go, and somewhere down the road they find they are wearing new skin.

This is closer in a way to our own experience than most of the Gospel stories of healing, as transformations almost always occur somewhere down the road, somewhere between hearing the command and reaching its destination.

In John Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress*, you might recall, when Christian arrives at the Wicket Gate, he complains that his burden is still on his back. His host replies, "As to the burden, be content to bear it, until thou comest to the place of deliverance, for there it will fall from thy back."

Further down the road, it does. The Word does not often heal us with immediacy; it commands us down a path to where healing overtakes us.

This is the experience of the ten, this healing on the highway. As they go, their ruined hands, feet and faces put on new flesh, perfect as a child's.

Naturally they are ecstatic, and do what any of us would do if headed down the highway with a brand new life: they accelerate. Jesus told them to go, and in the going they were healed. What are new feet for if not to the finish what we are commended to do? To the priests then, and at full speed!

But one of them drops back, stops, turns around. Apparently something much more than mere compliance comes into his mind. He has been healed, and he recognizes its source.

He is a new man, and that calls for a new voice. He runs back, “praising God with a loud voice,” says Luke. And then he falls at the feet of Jesus, pouring out the gladness of his thanks – his eucharist.

I don’t suppose retaining composure has any place here. It isn’t a tidy little thank-you speech but more likely a stammering babble and a puddle of tears in the dust.

Someone has written that praise is “the jazz factor” of faith – maybe we could say it is the ‘foot tapping’ of faith. Well, this former leper in Luke’s story has sure found the jazz of it. His freedom has found its voice and is having a proper play of it at Jesus’ feet.

“And he was a Samaritan,” says Luke. Double or triple surprise, this returnee, this one without caution, is a Samaritan! An outcast among outcasts, unworthy at the outset, never mind the leprosy. Cleansed of one stigma, but still wearing another.

It is the outcast who is the one who has turned back for doxology.

Why is this? Why is it that so often the marginalized seem to live closer to the freedom of praise than those with unquestioned membership? This is what Jesus would like to know, or would like us to ponder.

“Weren’t they’re ten?” he says, sounding a little playful maybe, ...but at the same time it is a haunting question. “Where are the nine?” Well it is perfectly obvious where the nine are. They are doing what Jesus told them to do. They are the literalists, God love them; they are doing their duty. They have taken to the road as commanded, found their cleansing on it, and seem to think that staying on the road is the thing.

One commentator has compared them to Forrest Gump with a football, they have crossed the goal line and go right on running, clear out of the stadium, where the celebration happens without them!

Maybe part of what keeps them running is their eagerness to be certified. That’s what the priests will give them: certification of cure, with all the membership privileges reinstated. Maybe a Samaritan knows better than to put too much value in these.

Maybe it was as simple as realizing that a priest would have nothing to do with a Samaritan, in the first place.

Maybe he knew that barriers to joining society on the Galilean side of the border ran far deeper than leprosy. Maybe this is why he’s free to pour out praise.

He has already received all that will matter, and he knows it. Therefore he also knows what time it is: it is doxology time, praise time. As Gerard Manley Hopkins said, “to deliver it, early now, long before death/Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God.”

“Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

The question is not “Where are the nine? But “Where is the tenth?”

“Where is the one who followed his heart instead of his instructions?”

The lesson here is not about being well behaved. Because the nine who return are the ones who were doing what was expected of them!

We all too often can resemble a dutiful procession of cleansed people who are bent on doing the right thing:

Clean people, good people, correct people, showing up faithfully, receiving the blessing of the priest, moving on down the road.

Jesus seems to be asking, “Where is the one who wheels round to return the wildness of love? Where is the tenth person?”

It is interesting to note the change that overtakes the Samaritan. At first, together with the other nine, he keeps his distance, respecting the social conventions surrounding his disease. Yet when he returns he abandons that, and as a healed person breaches that formidable boundary, moving from painful isolation to grateful intimacy.

Maybe that is why the Samaritan came back, not simply because he desired or felt obliged to say thank you...but out of a yearning for intimacy with Jesus.

Maybe he had a sense that faith cannot simply mean the performance of rituals and practices...but faith lures us into relationship with God that is intimate, humbling, healing.

Jesus requires our obedience, but he loves the jazz of our answering gladness.

And so he says to the one at his feet, "Your faith has made you whole."

Up until now in Luke's gospel Jesus has spoken these words to two persons, both of them outcasts, both of them women, one shedding her tears (the one who washes Jesus' feet with her tears), one finding her voice (the one cured of her hemorrhaging), and both of them doing so, strikingly so, at Jesus feet.

And where else do you find the music?

Obedience is needed for the cure, but not all of the cured are whole. The whole are those whose hearts break into praise, who fall with abandon at the feet of Love to improvise their own loving answer.

In mid-October 17 men of our parish gathered for a weekend of reflection and community at Cathedral Ridge. We considered the meaning of the Eucharist for our living. We ended our time with an intimate Eucharist where together with the bread and wine we each brought out of our own lives what was in need of blessing and transformation, written on bits of paper, to be offered up with the bread and wine; to be taken, blessed, broken and given back to us for our mending and the mending of others.

You could almost feel the jazz!

Obedience is surely needed for the curing of our hearts and bodies, but for us to be made truly whole, a wild and wonderful and even subversive discovery of returning gratitude...of praise... is necessary.

Subversive because it overturns any entitlement to healing and shames any  
arrogance which might linger in us.

Each unselfconscious burst of grateful praise to God, of thanksgiving...is like the  
final magic ingredient in a chef's prize-winning dish.

It is in grateful praise that we find ourselves made whole...in God's time, and more  
than likely 'down the road.'

For such gratitude is what teaches us the truth about our lives...that only by that  
wild turning to the source of our healing are we actually and gladly made whole,  
once again, and again and again.

Entering the fall season this year I have been thinking in a pointed way about what  
a complete gift this parish is to me and I trust to each of us.

...Sunday after Sunday, week after week  
...the word of healing and blessing, in word and sacrament  
...in architecture and music and rich liturgy  
...in the faces, touch, peace and embrace of one another  
...in the rich opportunities for growth, challenge, fellowship and ministry  
...in the presence of new friends among us week by week, who are living signs of  
God's promise, of God's future and faithfulness

How ample and unfailing is the mercy and healing of God in Jesus Christ!

"Where is the tenth one?"

Where are the ones who because they know that they have been mended in the deepest recesses of their lives, are compelled to return, again and again, to render praise and thus to be made whole, really whole?

With the vision faith brings I see this sacred space filled with such ones...'tenth ones'...ones who are being made whole...each somewhere on down on their own road of life.