

Proper 23 C 2010

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

When is a river
Not a river?
Or rather,
When is a river
Not just a river?

Naaman the Syrian.
Our first lesson calls him an Aramean,
From the country that we now call Syria,
And then Jesus, in calling him out
In his first sermon in Nazareth
As one of the favored by God's all-inclusive mercy,
Calls him Naaman the Syrian.
And so, before we continue with his story,
We are, I believe, honor bound
To pause, and pray in silence
For a country and a people
In agony –
Pray for the people of Syria here and now –

And then, holding them in our hearts,
Return to the really rather charming story of Naaman the Syrian,
And to the question,
When is a river
Not just a river?

Naaman the mighty Syrian
Was miffed
When the great prophet Elisha
Sent a message,
Go and wash seven times in the River Jordan,
And you will be made clean.

No bowing and scraping,
No prayerful listening,
No hand waving,
Just a message.

And then,

When Naaman has a tantrum
Because his cure is not special enough,
His servants say,
Why are you upset because the cure is easy?
Why do you think it would be better
If it were difficult?

All you need to do
Is wash in the River Jordan.
Which is not just a river.

Yes, there are other rivers.
But Naaman could not have stayed home
And washed in just any river.

Only the River Jordan will do.
Only the River Jordan
Is sign and symbol
Of the promises of God –
The promise of freedom,
Of a land of abundance,
The promise of forgiveness and reconciliation,
The promise of new life.

I dipped my feet
In the River Jordan this summer,
And renewed my baptismal vows there,
Holding an olive branch in my hand.

Did that moment bring me freedom
And forgiveness and reconciliation?
I don't really know,
At least not yet.

I do know that I touched the water that Naaman touched,
That Jesus touched,
The water that speaks to us
Of all the promises of God.

The promises
That are for everyone.

The promises are for us,
And for everyone we would rather leave out.
Anyone who makes us uncomfortable or angry,
Defensive or afraid.

In the time of Jesus,
That was lepers,
Samaritans,
Tax collectors,
Prostitutes.

Those were the people
He went looking for.
And still does.

Jesus goes looking for those
Who are left out,
And invites them in.
He goes looking for the people
Who are lost,
And carries them home.
He looks for the people
Who are tied in knots,
And sets them free.

And God does this all the time,
Everywhere.
We don't need to go
To the River Jordan
To be healed and made whole
By the word of the living God.

This is good news.

God is everywhere,
We are free,
And there is truth
That is bigger
Than the mess and trouble that cover it up.

All we have to do is live
As though it were true –
And it will be true.
All we need to do
Is live in the promise.

How does that happen in today's gospel?
Lepers are made clean
And a Samaritan wins praise.

On the surface,
It might not have much to do
With life in Denver,
In a dark and decisive time
For a group of people
Gathered in St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
In the middle of a changing and uneasy,
Beautiful and broken neighborhood.
Gathered in a bewildering,
Turbulent time,
With an election that defies all expectations,
With possible futures yanked to and fro
By the continual unveiling
Of old wrongs and new fears.

What do lepers have to do with us?
Or Samaritans?
Is this gospel for us?

The gospel is always for us,
If we let it be.

We have a different understanding of leprosy these days,
But healing remains the same.
We have a different set of Samaritans now,
But defining ourselves by difference
Is still our way.

So let's spend a moment
Looking at this story.
It's so simple.
Ten lepers,
Outcasts, feared and reviled,
Approach Jesus and ask for mercy.

When they ask for mercy,
They are asking for more than pity.
they are asking for loving kindness,
Assurance, welcome, embrace.
They are asking to be recognized
As human beings,
Created in the image and likeness
Of the living God.
When they see God in the person of Jesus,
The merciful and compassionate,
They cannot help but cry out.

And what does Jesus do?

Does he fix them?

No –

He invites them into partnership.

It's easy,

And it's life-changing.

All they have to do is step out.

Go, and show yourselves to the priests, he says.

According to the law of Moses,

Only if they show themselves as healed and whole,

And the priest certifies this,

Can they reenter society.

Go, and show yourselves to be healed and whole.

Here's the surprise of this gospel story:

They are not well when Jesus speaks the word –

They are only well

When they step out in faith,

And make themselves well.

It's only when they begin to journey

That their healing begins.

Jesus does not fix them and then send them on their way.

He tells them to get up and go.

Only when they do that

Does the healing take hold.

The gospel begins

When the journey begins.

When we act on the good news

Believing it to be true,

It is true.

If we wait,

It waits for us.

When we start out

On the road,

The road opens up before us.

We are partners with God

in creating the future we believe in.

What does that mean in your own life?
It might mean many things.
Healing of old hurts,
reconciliation, forgiveness,
new possibilities.

Until we act on them,
They remain only possibilities.
When we walk into the future with God,
The good news becomes true.

What does that mean in our life together?

It means we can do
What we imagine God is calling us to do.
We can meet our neighbors
And enter into partnership with them.
We can welcome seekers and their questions.
We can make an oasis of peace and beauty.
We can make a place for children,
And a place for quiet.
We can bring comfort and joy
Out into a world that is hungry, hurting,
Angry, and lonely.
We can build the future
God invites us to build.

We have everything we need
To walk into the future we envision.

We have everything we need
To seek and serve our neighbors.

We have everything we need
To build up a community
That is life-giving, hope-filled,
And joyful.

There is no promised land
That is not here.

But this is all we need.
The promise of God
Is waiting here,

As it is waiting everywhere,
For everyone.

This, though, is our place.
This is the city where we find ourselves,
And in its shalom,
Its wellbeing,
We will find our own.

God has a future for us,
A future that is unformed
Until we begin to create it with God.

If we start walking,
On our way,
We will find
Our heart's desire.

Healing, and wholeness,
And fullness of life.
All we have to do is believe it,
And start walking towards it.
As soon as we do,
We will find that it was already here.

And then, we give thanks.
We stop in our tracks,
Return to the source of life,
Give thanks and praise.
And then what?
The gospel story we read today
Doesn't say what happens next.

So imagine it is your own life.
Where do you go from here?
Let that be the good news for you today.

God has healed you and made you whole,
Already and forever.
When you act on that,
It becomes real in your life.

All we have to do is make it so.
And that's the gospel truth.

