

## Turning Back

The tenth leper - Luke 17:11-19

### Slide: Broken, Leave Alone

Last Monday, I attended the Pastor's Bible study to discuss the readings of this Sunday and saw these chairs with a sign attached to them: "Broken, Leave Alone!" Of course, the desire was to communicate to church members there at Our Savior's in Chippewa Falls that these chairs could collapse if someone sat on them, broken as they were.

It was meant as a good word of warning to protect. But, I thought how like this week's readings, about ten people with leprosy, people who were indeed broken and could not be touched, isolated, ostracized, and removed from community. They were indeed broken and left alone.

But, it also reminded me of us and how difficult gratitude can be these days. Before the pandemic, gratitude was difficult then, too. But now, it seems as if people are on shorter fuses,

more isolated, polarized in a world where thankfulness seems to be instead deeply integrated with our tendency associate gratitude with privilege and blessing. What is true gratitude today and how can we learn to be kinder to each other and to ourselves, harnessing that gift?

### Slide: Gratitude

Gratitude is a tricky thing, really. False gratitude because we have to or false positivity; neither these things are gratitude. It's one thing to survive a hurricane with your life and be grateful. Those big things, sudden relief from death or disease, usually do bring about natural, immense gratitude as it did for the leper in the Gospel story.

But, when the daily suffering in life sets in, the problems, transitions, and instability, how do we still have grateful hearts, especially when it's so much easier to complain. Our brains are more wired to attach to negative experiences rather than positive ones.

The practice of gratitude, therefore, is really that, a practice. The more we practice it, the more grateful we tend to become about our being. There are all sorts of studies that show this to be true. Could it be that in the practice of daily thank yous for what we see and experience, no matter how small, we become more thankful just by going through the motions?

**Slide: Healing of the ten**

I think this leads us to the Gospel reading today, a story that has often caused me some confusion. Is this a story about the nine with leprosy who did *not* turn again to Jesus in gratitude or is this about the one with leprosy, who instead of showing himself to the priest, turned back to Jesus?

On one hand, the nine were simply doing what Jesus told them to do according to the law— Go show yourselves to the priest. For in so doing, those people could not be declared healed and reintegrated into their families

and communities without the priest declaring them so. The priest was the doctor of those days. It was the priest who would decide if you were clean. Jesus would have known this, which is likely why he told them to do this.

And, by doing this, the nine who had leprosy were given the gift of acceptance back into the community, the church family and into their past lives. Furthermore, Jesus didn't put an ultimatum on them by saying that if they thanked him, they would be healed. They simply were healed. Jesus never expected them to thank him as a condition. In many of the other miracle stories, thanksgiving isn't declared. Why would it be important here then?

Yet, on the other hand, the one Samaritan, who was a foreigner, who by most accounts would not have been thought of as valuable; in fact he would have been considered an enemy, he doesn't obey Jesus. He doesn't go to the priest like Jesus tells him to do since

Samaritans did not adhere to the same laws as Jews did. He would have no need to go to the priest. Instead, he found within himself the desire to give thanks. In gratitude, as he is on his way, he finds he is healed, and is so overwhelmed with gratitude, he cannot help but return in thanksgiving.

### **Slide: From Healing to...**

Jesus heals ten people whether they thanked him or not. And, by not thanking Jesus the nine still were healed from leprosy. So, what did the one who turned back to Jesus receive that the others did not? This is where we get at one of the more integral points of why Luke included this healing story in his Gospel. The Samaritan who returned to Jesus to give thanks received something else the others did not. He received complete wholeness. He was saved.

You see, the English translation here isn't very helpful. When Jesus tells him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you

well," Jesus didn't mean that his faith had healed him from leprosy. The Greek word "to be made well" – the word "well" is not the same word as the word "healed". Here, the word means to be saved. And, even the King James Version has it closer with the translation "to be made whole".

So, in a way, a better translation here would be to say, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you" or "your faith has made you whole." It is in seeing what God had done for him that the Samaritan had received more than healing. He had received salvation, he had received wholeness.

There is another part of this story of the one who returned to Jesus to give thanks and praise God for being healed. In the Gospel, it says that when he saw that he was healed he turned back, praising God. The phrase to turn back, to return, to turn around refers to repentance, the returning back to God, something for which we do at worship every week and did

today – our confession of sin. This Samaritan turned back because he truly saw who it was that had saved him, not only from leprosy, but gave him the second blessing of wholeness.

This is more than healing from an ailment. This is whole life healing. This is baptismal in nature, to be given faith and salvation. But, the Samaritan had to become aware that it was truly Jesus, not a priest or a faith community, not a ritual or a rule, that saved him.

### **Slide: Repent and Return**

Turning back in gratitude to God - Did you know that's what we do in worship every week? In fact, when asked about what true worship actually was, Martin Luther once exclaimed, "True worship is the tenth leper turning back." When we come to worship, we are the broken ones turning back to God in gratitude, recognizing new life, new chances, new hopes and salvation. We call this confession of sin and it is intrinsically connected to the

gifts of Holy Baptism. Here at the waters, the balm that brings blessing and healing, we receive new life every time we turn back.

Confession is a gratitude practice, which is why we do it every week. Sometimes we may feel like we just say the words, and go through the motions, but the forgiveness of sins is really a miracle story. The declaration of forgiveness is an extraordinary thing. We can be forgiven just by asking God? Wow! What a miracle!

Coming to worship is simply looking for the healing around us, whether it is healing from disease, relationships, difficulty, or even the healing that comes in recognizing the simple gifts and blessings we aren't taking moments to see, the gift of water in Holy Baptism, the precious gift of Christ in the bread and wine, the beauty of the creatures and nature around us. Turning back to see the gifts of Jesus takes awareness and openness to see the healing that could be there.

## **Slide: Summer Stretch**

At Summer Stretch each summer, the middle school youth take time at lunch to talk about God Moments. They are asked to see and notice where God is at work during their service project or observing what they witness during the day. These God moments that are shared are wonderful ways of noticing in gratitude what God is doing in and around you. It's actually not an easy first time experience until you do it. We are not always naturally attuned to thinking in this way, observing God's messages to us in the daily life.

Yet, when you start your day looking for God's presence in people, in situations, in events, and in nature around you, it becomes easier to have gratitude, even on the toughest of days. God moments show us the wholeness God desires for us and God's creation. If you are open to it, you can't help but see God's presence in the world.

So, I'm going to ask you to do something a bit out of your comfort zone to practice God Moments. Find a person next to you or near you and take a moment or two to share a God Moment that you can think of from this week or even today that you have seen the love of God in others, in you, in a situation or in nature. Then switch so the other person can share. I'll give you just a minute or two to share now.

**(Pause)**

Sometimes, it just takes a moment to turn around and see Jesus healing you in your life. The Samaritan did and in doing so, he more than physical healing. He received saving and wholeness. This week, I pray that you will turn again in gratitude to see the one who makes you whole in the numerous God Moments that are there for you. Amen.