

Sermon

“New Beginnings”

October 13th, 2019 – First Presbyterian Church

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 17:11-19

Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)

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.”

Prayer

These are your words O, God. Humble us to speak their weight. Strengthen us to hear their truth. Unbind us to live their call. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, for the sake of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen

New Beginnings

As we pick up in our story today, we meet Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, he’s somewhere in between Galilee and Samaria, an area sometimes called “no man’s land.” And on the road, outside the village, Jesus comes across a group of lepers.

Now, it makes sense that the lepers would be there because in Jesus’ day, lepers were pushed to the outskirts of society...both literally and physically.

People at the time lived in dread of leprosy, a general term used to describe any skin blemish or eruption that looked suspicious. Today we know that actual leprosy, or what we call Hansen’s disease, is actually very treatable, but in Jesus’ time any skin blemish was thought to be radically contagious, and so the appearance of anything on the skin, no matter its size or location, was considered suspicious and immediate precautions were taken.

First, those skin blemishes, were considered an indication of uncleanness, meaning a person with leprosy wouldn’t be allowed to participate in the rituals of worship and sacrifice within the community.

They were considered unclean. And being unclean meant they didn't belong to the community.

And second, in an effort to protect everyone and everything else, Levitical law mandated physical separation from the community (Leviticus 13:46). And so, people with leprosy lived in total isolation; banished from their homes and without any form of human contact. In fact, some feared it so greatly that even to cross the shadow of one with leprosy was to risk infection.

And so, lepers lived alone, away from the community. And often, as we see here in our text, they banded together to become a small company of lepers. Because then they were at least outcast together.

And so, when these lepers saw Jesus approaching, they kept their distance even from him. After all they didn't want to risk their hope of being made well by making the person who could heal them unclean as well.

From a safe distance they call out to Jesus saying, "Jesus, Master have mercy on us!"

And, upon seeing them, Jesus simply instructs them saying, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

Just in case you're not married to a Levitical scholar, and the details of Levitical law aren't a regular discussion over dinner in your household, let me tell you, Jesus' instructions make sense because after a leper was thought to be cured, meaning the skin blemishes had gone away, the first step would be to go to the priests to be examined by them. If the priests found the disease truly cured, then the person could undertake rituals and sacrifices in order to become ritually clean again (Leviticus 14:10-32) and so be welcomed back into the community.

But what's odd is that this is the point in a typical healing story that Jesus would actually do something, and healing would immediately take place.

This time, however, Jesus simply instructs them to go and to show themselves to the priest. They needed to leave from that place and begin the process that might eventually allow them to regain their full status within the social and worship life of Jewish community.

But they had to go based on faith that something would happen.

All ten of the lepers were faithful enough to start on their way to the priests, even though there had not yet been any dramatic or definitive healing. All ten believed or hoped enough to start a journey that very well could have resulted in disappointment and even ridicule.

And then the Gospel of Luke tells us that the lepers were made clean while they were on their way to the priests.

I think these ten lepers have something to teach us about following God. So often our human tendency is to wallow in self-pity or stay frozen

in time or wait until everything is perfectly worked out before taking the next step. But for the lepers, their healing occurred when they responded faithfully to Jesus' instructions, before they knew for sure that they had been healed.

Sometimes new beginnings happen on the way.

And these new beginnings always require a step of faith into an uncertain future. It means moving forward with no guarantee of what will happen next or even what the outcome will be.

But the beautiful thing is that when we take those steps of faith, there can be no doubt that it's God writing the story and not ourselves.

Because if we were writing the story our steps would be taken with knowledge of what is to come. But when God writes the story, we're challenged to take those steps by faith alone.

Taking these steps is hardly ever easy, but it is part of the life of faith.

I'm reminded of this place. I imagine that it would have been easier to call a new Head of Staff before beginning to consider my position. And yet, you stepped in faith and began a search process (and I'm glad you did!).

And now, as I begin this call, we have an opportunity to continue taking steps of faith together, to faithfully follow God even when the future isn't completely laid out. We have a chance to build upon great traditions, while also trying new things. In doing so we can prepare ourselves for what is still to come for us.

It's not always an easy road and it requires us to have faith in God for what is still to come. But I think it's also a road made easier when we do it together. When we take those steps of faith as a community rather than trying to go at it alone.

And like those ten lepers, we never know what could happen while we're on the way.

But what's striking about our text is that the story doesn't end with this miraculous healing on the way. Instead, while they were on their way, one of the lepers noticed that he was healed.

Now we presume all ten were healed on their way to the priest, so did the others not notice? Or did they notice, but simply continue on their way to the priest?

They had a lot to gain by continuing on their way to the priests. Because for them, the priests were the vital next step in the process toward becoming ritually clean and being welcomed back into society.

But just one, upon noticing that he was healed, stopped, turned around and returned to Jesus, falling at Jesus' feet and thanking him. And Jesus says to him, "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?"

Because the one who returned was actually a Samaritan, a group of people hated by the Jews, which makes this leper an unlikely candidate to be lifted up as a model of what faith should look like.

We don't know what happened to the nine...their lives unfold beyond the story that Luke recounts for us. We have every reason to believe that those nine took their own new beginning and lived out their days admirably as good and productive members of the community.

But the Samaritan returned to the center of the drama, lying down at Jesus' feet in gratitude and wonder. He sees something that others seem to have missed and makes a move to be part of it...Jesus is healing people over here! Look what God is doing!

Don't get me wrong, all ten had the faith to obey Jesus and start on their way to the priests. But only one showed a different kind of faith to return to Jesus praising God. Only one saw that what Jesus had done did not just mean his own life would improve, but also that this was a whole new way of being.

Because in this story the love of God reached not just to the leper, but also to a foreigner. The love of God was both present and powerful and it was reaching beyond all boundaries, touching some of the most unlikely of characters.

And so, by returning to Jesus this former leper demonstrates a faith that lays hold on God, that cannot and will not remain silent in response to what God has done in his life, that publicly, spontaneously, and joyfully directs its thanksgiving to God.

Because when the end of the story is something that only God could have written, we can't help but pause and say thank you.

But perhaps this encounter also calls us into deeper faith by challenging our notions of gratitude. For many it might be easy to remember to say thank you for the big things...things like a new job or the birth of a child or health. But it's often more difficult to remember to say thank you for the little things, the ordinary and mundane things of life.

It's not unlike a child who is taught to say thank you for birthday or Christmas gifts, but forgets to say thank you for the countless daily things provided for them by those who love them.

It takes practice to develop this sense of deep gratitude for all things. And yet, it is perhaps the most basic Christian response to God. And there is so much to be grateful for...the gift of life, the world, the people God has placed in our lives. And above all, gratitude to God for God's love shown to us in Jesus Christ and the accompanying gift of

hopeful confidence and wholeness and wellness, regardless of the worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves.

And I would argue that gratitude is actually part of our Christian responsibility...that we, with our whole lives, must show ourselves grateful to God for God's goodness.

The Heidelberg Catechism, which is a set of questions and answers about what we believe and about the life of faith asks this, "Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why then should we do good works?" (Question #86)

And then answers, "Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, is also restoring us by his Spirit into his image, so that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits, so that he may be praised through us, so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ."

But so often gratitude isn't our first response. It's often easier to be like the other nine lepers who continue on their way to the priests, who perhaps recognize the gift that has been given to them, but then simply go on without recognition of the giver of such a gift.

Gratitude is challenging because offering praise and worship to God goes against our human inclinations in a world of independent and self-made people. I mean who actually enjoys the thought of owing everything good and worthy in our lives to someone else? Who actually wants to confess that we are not self-made, but are actually created beings? Who wants to admit that we rely on someone other than ourselves?

But that is the very nature of gratitude, and as this tenth leper teaches is the very life of faith.

Because the Samaritan boldly demonstrates a faith that the Westminster Catechism calls the chief and highest end of human beings...that is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Professor George Stroup described this life saying, "The purpose and end of human existence is gratitude and doxology not because of who human beings are, but because of who God is. The God before whom humans live is a splendor beyond human comprehension, to whom humans respond appropriately only in adoration and praise."¹

In fact, perhaps this act of worship is what makes us truly human, that is humans within God's creation. Theologian John Burkhart, in writing about worship once wonder whether "humans can survive as humans without worshiping. To withhold acknowledgment, to avoid

¹ George Stroup, *Before God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 24.

celebration, to stifle gratitude, may prove as unnatural as holding one's breath."²

Worship is certainly at the heart of the Christian life, and the story of the one who returns to give thanks points us to that truth. God promises to be at work in the world, in our church, in our lives; so, we cannot help but give thanks.

And so then, Jesus' final words, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well," become a description of a life of blessing for the church. For as we too go on our way, we rejoice and give thanks...for in giving thanks in all things, we find that God is indeed in all things.

Amen

² John E. Burkhardt, *Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); quoted in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy*, ed. Gabe Huck (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 148.