

14 October, 2007
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Well, this morning in this gospel from Luke we hear this very familiar story. It's one of those that can just blow right past us because we've heard it so many times, it just becomes like wallpaper, you don't even notice [it] after a point. But there's some interesting little bits in there that I just want to throw out to you just to kind of help feed the imagination a little bit so it can help move you into the story a little bit more.

The practice of the day with regard to lepers was that they had to keep their distance from the clean population since they were unclean. Often they rang bells and they always had to shout out as they approached anyone, "Unclean!" That gave fair warning to anybody who was nearby because the thought was that you contracted this as a contagion. Not that they completely understood all this business, mind you, but that was what they thought.

And for all the people who were lepers it didn't matter what your background was, you were all just outcasts together.

And so this little group of ten comes up to Jesus and they seemed already to have had some interaction with him or something, they knew who he was. They called him by name – they didn't just say, 'unclean', they called [to] him, "Jesus, master have mercy on us." They had some inkling that possibly he, being a known healer, wonder-worker, that he might be able to help them. Somehow. They aren't specific – they just say 'Mercy'.

Well he sends them to the priest to show themselves because it was the priests and the priests only who could restore them to their rightful place in society. Once you had contracted leprosy you would be an outcast, you would be just anathematized. But the priest could re-admit you by seeing that you were healed.

The interesting thing is, that no matter how healed the Samaritan was, he would never had been admitted at the temple. The priest would not have spoken to him because he was still a Samaritan. And so with his healing, he's lost his community. Before his healing, he'd had these other nine, who were Jews, and they were a little group of outcasts together and we have no idea what the nature of that relationship might have been. But once they are all ten healed, they have to part ways. They are no longer outcasts together. Now he's a Samaritan and they're Jews.

That takes us to the Samaritan's action. He returns [to Jesus], he's got nowhere to go. The nine have gone off to do what Jesus told them to do. He can't go. He returns to Jesus in great celebration.

Just think about it. Just think about what leprosy does to a person. It's not just the social stigma. It's not just that you've lost your family, you've lost your people.

You've also probably lost your fingers, your nose, your ears, portions of your face. It's awful. Absolutely awful. It's rotting flesh, so you can imagine what that's like. And now he's healed. He goes to Jesus, giving thanks to God, but thanking Jesus as the vehicle through which God was able to bring this amazing transformation to his life. He has gone from being a walking dead man to being fully alive and returned to who he was.

Well now, it's pretty easy to understand his gratitude. It's not often that we are as aware of healing like that, in quite that dramatic a way. I think it happens all the time, but we're just not quite as aware of it. It doesn't seem as miraculous. But every hospital, every surgical center, every doctor's office and all kinds of other places see more amazing healings than this all the time.

Gratitude, though. The others may well have been feeling the feeling. He acted. What is it, though, about this gratitude? How would you even describe the feeling? You know, it's not like mindlessly jotting off a little thank-you note. You know... 'Dear Friend, thank you for the... thing that you gave me for.. whatever it was..'

It's really that there's a feeling, a sort of a tone that comes over the body. It's a kind of warm fuzzy that comes as a result and we move into that. There's a way in which we feel a connection to the other person or to the circumstance. That whatever barriers there might have been or might even continue to be seem to be kind of pulled aside, even if just for the moment and there is a connection there. It may go away again soon, but at least for the moment we have a taste of that, a taste of that unity.

As a result, when we are going through life, if we are looking for opportunities to be thankful to others for the slightest little thing - a pleasant gesture in the checkout line at the grocery store might be all that it takes or somebody holding a door for you; any little thing all the way up to the big stuff - it can become a habit. It can help us. It may seem kind of just *pfft* but if it becomes habitual - if we habitually keep bringing ourselves back to this stance of gratitude, this position, this feeling tone of gratitude - it makes us feel better for one thing. But it also brings us into a greater awareness of those connections. And the more we are brought into awareness of those connections, the more it is that we live a connected life. Not just a life of isolation.

And so as a spiritual practice the act of gratitude, which can lead to the emotional posture of gratitude, can be very important. And we keep carrying that as far as we can, because it's not just the someone holding the door, but what was it that motivated the person to do so?

Eventually it all goes back to God. It all goes back to the source. Ultimately all of our gratitude goes through other circumstances and other people back to God as the source of all things. As the ground of all being, as Tillich said.

And so, I commend that to you as a spiritual practice. It's even part of our worship, believe it or not. You know what one of the names for the Eucharistic prayer is? The Great Thanksgiving. What we are doing at the Holy Communion is that we take whatever it is – what we have given these symbols of our life and labor (check, money, good thought) and place those on the altar. We put bread and wine up there as another part of the sign of our life and labor. We present that to God and then we say, "Thanks for everything. **Everything**. Our very lives. Forgiveness. Eternal life. Jesus Christ." Little things like that.

Now that is in a sense [just] one side of the whole gratitude thing. The other side of it and the real test seems to be more difficult on the surface and from a distance. That is being grateful in circumstances that you would never in all your life ask for. The reading from Jeremiah alludes to that: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in exile." Be happy and glad that you are in, well, Baghdad. Babylon. Be happy about that. Seek the welfare of that place because it's going to be your welfare too because you're there.

How is it that we can be thankful for stuff that we would not wish on our worst enemy? And yet, I encounter it over and over and over again. I talk to people who have cancer. Whose life suddenly has some possibility of ending. We try to live like we're going to live forever – we don't want to think about it and then suddenly there's some disease that's standing right there saying, "Maybe soooooo. I might get you. Or not." And [to] have people say that what happened in their life after that diagnosis was the most important thing that happened to them in their life. That for the first time in their life they've been alive. That relationships seemed to just flower. That their view of people, of spouses, seemed to have a whole layer pulled off so they could see that person like they'd never seen and experienced them before in their lives.

Things that had seemed trivial suddenly seemed to take shape. The priorities in life suddenly became very clear. Family and friends took on a completely new importance. Things that they'd always wanted to do – maybe they did and maybe they suddenly say, who cares? What difference could that make?

And [it's] not just life-threatening diseases. Death of a loved one. Losing a job. Finding a job.

All manner of change in life can bring grief and with that grief an unfolding and a clarity of vision previously unknown.

And so when I was over at hospice with someone who said, "Cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me," I knew he wasn't crazy [but] that his life took on meaning that he never would have experienced prior to that.

When we come to the altar and we give thanks for the bounty of our lives, we can also bring those seemingly shattering experiences that open us up to the depths of meaning and of life that we've never known before. And you don't have to tell anybody, because they'll think you're nuts. But you know the truth. You've experienced that clarity, that depth in the midst of grief and pain and laughter and all of that.

So I invite you. Let your hearts be glad in the midst of the pain and the terror. Let your hearts be glad and thankful in the midst of all that life presents.

Amen.