

Sermon for Oct. 13, 2019

Rev. James A. Wetzstein

Chapel of the Resurrection

Readings:

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

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

NOTE: The text of this sermon is drawn from an audio recording of the sermon given Oct. 13, 2019.

The Holy Gospel according to Luke.

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."

Sisters and brothers in Christ, this Gospel reading is frequently used as a word of encouragement toward Thanksgiving. In fact, it's the gospel reading that is assigned in the lectionary for days of Thanksgiving. So at the end of November if you are in church on Thanksgiving or the eve before Thanksgiving, you might very well hear this Gospel reading again. Tomorrow, incidentally, is Canadian Thanksgiving day because it's always the same Monday as Columbus Day. And my hunch is that there are several Canadian pastors this morning who are heading down that Thanksgiving path having been gifted this text. So when we pair it or when we have it paired with the Old Testament reading (2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c), which you heard earlier, this story of the healing of Naaman, the man from Damascus, we're invited to recognize that there's actually a whole lot more going on in this Gospel reading. And maybe the main point of this reading is not the encouragement to Thanksgiving, maybe it's something even more critical, more foundational, more important. If you go back and take a look at the reading -- and you've got it there before you in the booklet -- you'll notice that the thankfulness is not linked at all to the effectiveness of the healing. All enter healed. The Gospel is very clear about that. And, in fact, the Gospel is totally silent about the thankful disposition of the other nine. Presumably, they did as they were told and went and showed themselves to the priest. The protocol in Leviticus 17, is very clear. There's a step by step set of instructions for what you're supposed to do if you are suffering from a contagious skin disease and

believe yourself to have been cured. And it includes showing yourself to the priest outside of the camp of the people. Remember, Leviticus is presented to the people in the context of their wandering in the wilderness. And then after the priest confirms the fact that you are healed, then you enter into the camp, approach the tent of meeting with an offering that does two things: One is it's an offering of repentance for your sinfulness, because that's always appropriate. And the second is there's an offering of thanksgiving for your healing. So presumably -- the Gospel doesn't say this, but I think it's reasonable to assume -- the other nine headed off to go find a priest probably in Jerusalem. And if they were successful in finding the priest and show themselves to be cured, as the Gospel says they were to do, they then proceeded from there to the temple, the grand temple, which was essentially Disney World of the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean. Tourists came to the temple. It was quite the place, super sophisticated, super wealthy, super, super ornate. So they would go to the temple, they would make their sacrifice of atonement and thanksgiving and presumably be on their way.

Jesus says that the tenth guy comes back to praise God. And if you look at the man's posture, you'll notice that Luke tells us he comes to Jesus and prostrated is a little bit, well, it's very formal sounding word. What's actually going on here just to help you out is the man comes to Jesus and falls on his face in front of Jesus and then *Eucharist* Jesus. The Greek word is *Eucharisto*, though which is the same word for Eucharist because it sounds just like it because it means Thanksgiving. So he falls in front of Jesus assumes a posture of worship and offers praise and thanksgiving Jesus interprets to God.

Recently I was asked if there's anywhere in the Gospels where Jesus is identified as divine. I think this is one of those places. Later on, in the sequel to Luke -- Acts -- people approach Paul and Barnabas who are preaching and they fall on their faces before them because they think that Paul is Hermes, because he's the one doing all the talking and Barnabas is Zeus because he's the one who's standing there strong and silent. Paul and Barnabas are like "Don't! Get up, get up, we're just humans like you!" This is inappropriate behavior in front of another human being. Jesus welcomes it because this man has recognized something critically important. He has located the saving presence of God in the person of Jesus. He has located the saving presence of God, in the person of Jesus. God had promised that his name would dwell in the temple. That's why the priests are there to serve before the name of God. But this man, his own healing experience, confirming the location of the saving presence of God, is Jesus. And so he falls down and worships.

We -- maybe not us personally -- but our culture is more like Namaan. We're really sophisticated people with really sophisticated problems. And so we assume that our sophisticated problems will demand sophisticated solutions. Sometimes we fool ourselves with that presumption. An example from outside the world of religion or Christianity: I was listening yesterday to an interview with a research psychologist who studies anxiety and depression. She's a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Cambridge, so this is a no slouch institution, right? This is a sophisticated researcher doing sophisticated work at a sophisticated institution. And she was saying during the course of this interview that there are some coping mechanisms that they have discovered through their clinical research, quantifiable clinical research. Coping mechanisms, that people who negotiate their way through times of anxiousness seem to be able to do instinctively, but the rest of us can learn. I was folding laundry. I put down the T shirt that I was folding because I was really interested in hearing what she was going to say next because I get stressed out sometimes and I'm surrounded by students who are stressed out lots of times. She says, "my favorite one, the first one that I recommend, I call it 'Do it badly'." She says frequently we're anxious about things that seem insurmountable -- Stressed out, because we don't know the end of some

tasks that we've been assigned. We so want to do well that we get paralyzed, and petrified, just in the thought of having to start it. She said, "I suggest to people that they learn how to begin with the intention of doing a poor job. It makes it so much easier to get started," she said, "And so much easier to finish." She had all kinds of other things to recommend and I've posted a link to the interview on my Facebook page. You can take a look at it later.

But what about our spiritual lives? (Not that anxiety doesn't touch on our spirit ourselves.) What are you supposed to do if you're seeking to make meaning out of your life? Understand your value in this world, figure out what to do with your own failure, cruelty and harm -- not only to yourself, but to the people around you? Sort out how to behave in circumstances where others have done things to you, either intentionally or unintentionally? How do we grapple that problem?

I would suggest that what you need is a gracious encounter with the One who made you. An opportunity to face the One who formed you, knows you better than you know yourself, made you with intentionality so that you might give praise to His glory. I suggest to you that that encounter, that gracious encounter, comes in super simple, straightforward places like Jesus. Not that Jesus isn't sophisticated. I mean, the whole notion of the divinity and humanity of Jesus is really, really hard work. It takes the church 300 years to sort their way through it. But the presence of Christ comes to you in the simple water of your baptism, when the sign of the cross is made over you and you are reborn anew as a sister or brother of Jesus. The gracious presence of God comes to you in the forgiving word of the gospel proclaimed to your own ears by someone else. (Sometimes, well, sometimes not so well.) The gracious and forgiving presence of God comes to you in the bread and then the wine of the sacrament, which is said to be for you the living presence of Christ for your life. And sustenance for your continuing pilgrimage. It ain't rocket science, it's water, it's bread, it's wine. It's Word. It's the gracious presence of God, for you. So that you might know that you are beloved, so that you might know that you are forgiven. So that you might know that you have a vocation and meaning in this world. See, in Jesus, the reality of God's gracious presence for you and *Eucharist*. Give thanks.