

Year C Proper 28 Luke 17 11 to 19

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Luke makes sure we remember that Jesus is heading towards his death by constantly reminding us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. As God made flesh, Jesus is not only a sign for us of God's kingdom – showing us by his life what life will be like in the perfection of God's kingdom – Jesus also bears the kingdom...the presence of Jesus is the presence of the kingdom. It is at his death and resurrection in Jerusalem, that the new age of God's kingdom begins on earth by defeating the power of sin and death.

As Jesus journeys toward the inauguration of the new age on earth, he shows to us what we can expect in the fullness of God's kingdom. It is a life of wholeness. We have seen signs and bumper stickers saying, "Jesus saves." We often pray, asking God to save us, and we call Jesus our salvation. Save and salvation are related words, both coming from the root *sos* (S – O – S...hmmm) and it means to rescue, to heal, to make whole. This healing wholeness – this salvation – is what Jesus accomplished for us through his death and resurrection by providing us the way to be in relationship with God, reconciled to God, whole and "at one" with God. This is why we call Jesus our "atonement". It is one of the very few English theological words and it is a made up word that literally means "at-one-ment". We have lost the original meaning since we have lost the original pronunciation. Jesus is our way to "at-one-ment" with God.

Life in God's kingdom is a life of wholeness, at one with God. We see this wholeness today in the healing of the lepers. Who Jesus heals, how he heals them, where he heals them, and their response to being healed all have something important to tell us about God's kingdom and how we should respond while living in God's kingdom.

Let's begin with "where" Jesus heals. Luke tells us that Jesus was going through the region in between Samaria and Galilee. There is no such middle place. Samaria and Galilee share a border – there is no space in between. This was a well-known fact and Luke was not an uninformed person so, we know that his wording is meant to indicate something other than actual geographic separation. These people Jesus encounters are separated emotionally and relationship-wise from their communities – Samaritans on one hand and Jewish people of Galilee on the other. These people are separated, on the margins of their communities because all of them suffer from leprosy. Others lived in fear that they would catch the leprosy and so these ten men were keeping their distance from everyone else – everyone...including family and friends. Keeping their distance from Jesus, they cry out to him, asking him to have mercy on them. And they call him "Master." Master was a term that Luke, at all other times, only placed on the lips of the disciples.

These would-be disciples, shunned and on the fringes, cry out not to be healed but for mercy. They are earnestly calling out for not only physical wellness but also emotional and spiritual wellness. They want to be loved and accepted. They want to feel whole, inside and out. These are the people Jesus heals, in body, mind, and spirit – any and all victims of society, for whatever cause, these are the ones Jesus reaches out to in love and compassion and gives them wholeness. Jesus lifts them up and embraces them because that will be the reality for all people who choose to live in God's kingdom.

Jesus does have mercy and he does heal these ten lepers. He provides them with the wholeness they are craving. But, interestingly, he does not heal them by

approaching them and touching them or even by saying the words, “You are healed.” Jesus sends them. “Go,” he tells them. “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” People who were sick had to go to the priests in order for the priests to declare that they were now clean and able to enter back into society. The lepers clearly trusted that Jesus would come through for them because they set off on their journey without question. Just as Jesus was, himself, on a journey, he sends others on a journey as well. It is in the journeying that the healing happens.

We, too, are a “sent” people. We gather to be sent. Our liturgy has a movement to it...gathering and sending. We gather to be a community, the body of Christ. We praise, we pray, we hear God’s Word, we learn. We experience healing, restoration, reconciliation, nourishment, knowledge, and hope. And then we are sent. We are sent because what we begin here is never finished here. We are whole, we are one, in the body of Christ but that is not complete until we gather the rest of the world into that oneness. We cannot be completely whole unless we share what we have – the love, compassion, hope, joy, and abundance of God’s kingdom. That task is laid upon us and it will not be over until God’s kingdom comes in all of its fulness. Faith is often thought of as “believing” or as a warm feeling. But faith, being faithful, is a venture. Being faithful means responding to God with our lives.... Our general prayer of Thanksgiving reads, “give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives.”

As the lepers journey toward wholeness, one of them notices. There once was an oyster who saw a beautiful pearl that had fallen into the crevice of a rock on the ocean bed. After great effort she managed to retrieve the pearl and place it just

beside her on a leaf. This oyster knew that humans searched for pearls and thought, “This pearl will tempt them, so they will take it and leave me alone.” When a pearl diver showed up, however, his eyes were conditioned to look for oysters and not for pearls resting on leaves. So he grabbed the oyster, which did not even happen to have a pearl, and the diver’s movement of the water caused the beautiful pearl sitting beside the oyster to roll back into the crevice in the rock. (story by Anthony de Mello, p.45-6 of *Taking Flight*).

One leper notices the pearl. There are many pearls of healing wholeness strewn throughout God’s kingdom...the beauty of an autumn forest, the joy of giving to others, the gratitude of someone we have helped. We often notice these pearls, just as the one leper did, but do we respond the way this leper responded?

This one leper, upon noticing the healing, immediately paused his journey in order to praise God. His response was gratitude toward the One who had healed him, the One who had provided wholeness in his life.

Mary Jo Leddy, in her book called *Radical Gratitude*, writes, “We are afflicted with ingratitude. Because we take the basic gift of life for granted, we can assume that our lives are, for better or for worse, what we have made of them” (p.59). Moses warned us of this trap. As the people were about to enter into the Promised Land – a land of abundance, a land that would provide for all their needs, Moses warned them to remain thankful to God, to not forget that all good things come from God. I was in conversation with woman at the healing lodge in Garden River. The day was cloudy but, as we talked, a ray of sunshine broke through the clouds and struck her face. She immediately and without thinking, paused mid-

sentence to say, “Miigwech, gizhe-manidoo” – thank you, Creator. She noticed the pearl and she paused in her journey to respond with thankfulness.

As we hear of the one leper who loudly praises God and thanks Jesus for the healing, Luke then tells us, “And he was a Samaritan.” Why drop that tidbit in there? As I’ve mentioned before, the Samaritans and the Jewish people were once one and the same people but their paths diverged. The Jewish people viewed the Samaritans as ethnically impure and totally wrong in the way they worshiped God. Perhaps the Samaritans were just as harsh in their view of the Jewish people – we aren’t told. The story is told from the Jewish perspective and Jesus, through this story of Luke’s, is telling his fellow Jews to open their eyes and their hearts and minds. God’s kingdom is inclusive of everyone who walks in God’s ways.

Throughout all of Scripture, there is a noted focus on the outcast – like this Samaritan who also had the misfortune of being a leper – there is a focus on the outcast and the poor, those on the margins. Like I said earlier, God desires equality and reconciliation among all peoples...the erasing of the “us” and “them”; the eradication of social and economic boundary lines. This does not mean that God loves the poor and does not love the rich. God’s love is all-encompassing but sometimes this love is not noticed or not accepted. There are embittered, ungrateful poor people just as there are arrogant, ungrateful rich people. It is very often the case that the victims of society are on the fringes because the way our society works has put them there and keeps them there. Regardless of where we fall in society, it is the attitude of gratitude for God’s gifts that matters.

Perhaps it is true, as Mary Jo Leddy notes, that many rich people – but not all – find it difficult to be grateful to God because society convinces us that we are where we are in life as a result of our own efforts and intelligence. It is also true that many – but not all – of the utterly destitute also find it difficult to be thankful to God. Generations of poverty and addiction leave scars in body, mind, and spirit. There are many things in life that we are not thankful for but we can be thankful for the goodness that comes from God.

We come here to be thankful. The word “Eucharist” is the Greek word for thankfulness. Gathering in the presence of God, in God’s kingdom, our liturgies shape us and transform us through our experience of the good things God desires for us...hopeful, joyful, reconciled...and a thankful people. This posture of thanksgiving – founded on the awareness that we are living in God’s kingdom and the knowledge that God is bringing all things toward their intended perfection – is something that the dreary world desperately needs us to share. It never ceases to amaze me when the cold, hungry woman sitting on the hard cement sidewalk in downtown Sault Ste Marie, gives thanks to God when I stop to talk and give her a little money for food. She is not thankful that she is hungry. She is not thankful that she is cold and sitting on a cold sidewalk. She is thankful that I noticed her. She is thankful that I spoke to her as a fellow journeyer. She is thankful that I shared my abundance with her. I was her pearl and she paused in her journey to give thanks to God.

But...she was my pearl. I walked away from her feeling deeply humble, feeling utterly amazed at the joy that the love of God can inspire in the face of unpleasant circumstances. This is always my experience when I walk away after

hearing the grateful thanks of someone who doesn't seem to have anything much to be thankful for. I always walk away feeling a little more healed, a little more whole than I did when I started my day. And I pause in my journey and give thanks.

We gather to be sent. We gather to be made whole. We are sent to make the world whole. On this journey together, we notice our pearls and give thanks. We, then, must be pearls in the world to help the world give thanks. "Go," Jesus says to us. "Your faith has made you whole."