

October 10, 2010
Luke 17:11-19
Pastor Tim Koester

Faith and Thanksgiving - Joined at the Hip

Last week, we talked a lot about **faith**. Faith is **trust**. It is a **connection**. It is a **power** that helps us see new possibilities when we are at our weakest moment. Faith is the basis for our **relationship** to God but despite its importance, we often get faith wrong.

Faith happens at **God's initiative** not our own. We cannot simply "decide" to follow Jesus by an act of our own will because we do not possess that kind of power. Instead, God stoops down to our level and "woos" us with wonderful words and provides the means for faith to happen. (I recently discovered the old hymn *Wonderful Words of Life* while worshipping at the Good Samaritan Home!) In order for us to go to God, **God must first come to us** and that is what God did by coming to this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The "amount" of faith doesn't seem to be all that important. Last week we heard Jesus tell the disciples that even the tiniest speck of faith has an astonishing ability to move things around, although I'm not sure why anyone would want to uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea! I think the absurdity of that example simply shows how off-track we are when, like the disciples, we ask God for "more" faith. "**More**" is not the answer.

And that brings us to the text this morning. As if to provide an example of what faith looks like, Jesus comes across ten lepers while traveling to Jerusalem, the city where he will demonstrate ultimate faithfulness on the cross. The **lepers** live as **outcasts**, shunned by law to live an existence that prevents all forms of contact with the "normal" world. They are **unclean**, **unworthy**, and **unable** to participate in the life of the community. They were quarantined not because they were contagious but because they had a deadly social and spiritual disorder. Despite leprosy's symptoms on the outside of the body, their illness was widely viewed as something more than just 'skin deep'.

So together the ten of them cry out to Jesus, "Have mercy on us". They sing the song we sing nearly every Sunday, *Kyrie Eleison*, Lord have mercy! It is that simple cry, that **turn** towards Jesus as their healer and savior and friend, that demonstrates faith and makes healing possible. **All** of the lepers seem to show this faith. **All** are sent to the priests to be examined so that they can all be restored to "normalcy" and as they go on their way, **all** of them discover that yes - they are being healed. They can go back to their families and their communities! They can hang out again at the local bakery and go to parties and weddings and return to their rightful place in society. What an amazing thing! What a reason to give thanks!

Except of course, only one of them does give thanks to God. Only one returns to the feet of Jesus and throws himself down in a flat-out gesture of gratitude and that **one** was not the **one** you would expect. Luke goes out of his way to make sure we know this **one** was a **Samaritan**, a "**foreigner**" as Jesus says. He was from **across the border**, a man of the **wrong religion**, an **enemy**, an **outsider**. He was the least likely person to bow down at the feet of a Jewish man and give thanks to God. What are we to make of that?

I think perhaps two things. First of all, **faith is active in some of the most unusual people and the most unexpected places.** Much of the bible is filled with stories where God is at work through the faith of the **least likely people.** In our first lesson this morning, a foreign general takes the advice of a slave girl ends up being healed even after he almost storms off in a rage. Earlier in Luke, we see another Samaritan caring for a wounded traveler along the road. In the gospel of John, it is a Samaritan woman who receives 'living water' from Jesus at the well. It is a Canaanite woman whose daughter is freed from dark and destructive forces in Matthew and it is a Roman Centurion who confesses that Jesus is truly God's son, even as he is hanging on a cross.

Too often we want to think that faith is limited to only certain kinds of people but God is the God of all people. Jesus came to die for the sins of the WHOLE world and we are not in charge of how, or with whom, God will initiate faith. The fact that faith is often depicted in the bible as coming unexpectedly, should reinforce the understanding that **faith comes as a gift!** It is not our own. It is the Holy Spirit of God, working through ordinary means and ordinary people, who "woos" people to do extraordinary things through faith in something bigger than themselves.

The second thing to take away from the one Samaritan who returned to give thanks to God is that **thanksgiving makes us well.** English bibles translate that word differently but the idea is that something additional has happened to this one because he has returned to give thanks. All are made clean but because this one unexpected outsider "sees" and responds to what has happened, faith has "**saved**" him and made him "**whole**".

And that is the truly important thing. As human beings, we need healing from disease but we need saving from death and ultimate separation even more. **Thanksgiving is a healing of our spirit,** of our soul, and it makes all the difference in how we see the world. In the face of adversity, do we see danger or opportunity? In the face of human need, do we see demand or gift? In the face of the stranger, do we see potential enemy or friend?

And it goes further. When we look to God, do we see stern judge or loving parent? When we look to ourselves, do we see failure or beloved child who is claimed by God in the waters of baptism? When we look to the future, do we see fearful uncertainty or an open horizon where God is at work even in the middle of the most unexpected and painful circumstances?

How we answer depends upon how **much credit we give to God** and that act of **thanksgiving** dramatically shapes both our outlook and our behavior. A life of thanksgiving is a life of generous giving and radical hospitality because we cannot help but respond to the grace we have been given.

Before we are called to believe or confess or help or do we are called simply to see...and to help others do the same. **We are called, that is, to point out blessing, to claim mercy, to name grace** wherever we are and with all the courage we can muster. Let us go out with Joy because of what God had done for us, trusting in God's promise of salvation, and allowing that grace to transform our lives in new and unexpected ways. Amen