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(Proper 23, Year C, Track 2)
October 13, 2019

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

“The World Needs Our Joy”

“Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Sounds rather strange, doesn't it? Jesus is traveling *between* Samaria and Galilee, on his way to Jerusalem, and on his journey he stumbles upon ten lepers, all huddled together in a place far removed from the rest of the community. In ancient times, lepers were often quarantined, and it was only after they'd been inspected, and found to be well by the priests, that they were allowed to return to society.

All ten of the lepers cried out to Jesus, “Master, have mercy on us!” And as you would expect, Jesus responded to all ten by telling them to go and show themselves to the priests. The Gospel text tells us that they did exactly what they were told: They all went to the priests, and for that they were healed. This is a fairly straightforward proposition, isn't it? Obey the Lord, and you will be healed. Simple as that!

But in the end, the message in our Gospel reading this morning is not all that straightforward. As I said, Jesus was traveling *between* Samaria and Galilee when he stumbled upon the lepers. He was in neither country, but between both—in a place outside the boundaries—outside the realities of what was generally understood as “normal” or “typical” in Jewish, or for that matter, Gentile culture.

I imagine that Jesus might have been in what Barbara Brown Taylor calls a “thin place”—the kind of place, outside of time and space, where God seems to be everywhere. And let's just say that, when Jesus is between two realities, we need to pay attention—because in all likelihood, he stands on holy ground.

In the New Testament, Samaria was considered a “foreign country,” which is to say that it was not Galilee, the home of the Jews. The Samaritans were descendants of a line of people who'd broken away from the Hebrews during David's time, had intermarried with Gentiles, and had established their own country. So the Samaritans were clearly not on the same page as the Jews when it came to social and religious mores of the day. And within the context of our story—that is to say, from a distinctly first-century, Jewish perspective—the Samaritans were considered folks from the “other side of the tracks.”

And wouldn't you know it that, right after the ten lepers did precisely what Jesus told them to do, and were healed, one of them, a *Samaritan* mind you, turned back and fell prostrate before our Lord—and *thanked* him. The text doesn't say what the other nine did. Perhaps they simply headed home, relieved that they'd dodged a death wish.

But it took only one, a Samaritan, a social and religious outcast—and certainly someone his audience would *least* expect—to show them, and us, a completely different response to Jesus' healing presence. Nine of those who were healed simply left the scene. *Only one stayed to say “thank you.”*

Now in one sense, the Samaritan's response to Jesus tells us that the message of Christ was spreading beyond the confines of the Jewish world in Jerusalem, and that's certainly a good thing. But more importantly, the Samaritan's response of *gratefulness* shows us a heightened level of redemption, where the very means to healing is revealed as *steadfast faith*, not just momentary obedience, and the expression of that faith is *joy*, not indifference or silence—or even worse, a sense of entitlement.

After the Samaritan fell prostrate before Jesus in thanks, our Lord responded by pointing out that the other nine he'd healed hadn't shown a lick of thankfulness—a comment that was certainly intended to underscore the positive action of the Samaritan. And then, he turns all his attention to the Samaritan and commands him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

“Your faith has made you *well*,” he says.

In the original language of Luke's Gospel, the Greek word for “well”¹ translates as “saved, or made-whole again.” So here we see Jesus confirming that the Samaritan had not only been healed in body but also saved in spirit as a direct result of his gratitude.

Now, let there be no doubt: all ten lepers were healed—Jesus showed mercy to all the sick—but only one soul was saved. In the end, Jesus is directing our attention to the salvation of the inner life. He cares about the flesh, yes—he healed all ten—but he saved only one because that one soul expressed a faith that was *saturated with gratitude*.

Gratitude is an expression of eternal thanks. The Greek word used to express thanks here is “*euchariston*,” which translates as thanks based on *continuous* action. What this means is that the Samaritan did not just thank Jesus once for his healing. Rather his thanks translated into a kind of *eternal thanks* that started at the moment of his healing and continued on—*forever*—for the rest of his life. So gratefulness, as expressed by the Samaritan to Jesus, is *eternal thankfulness*. And if someone is truly, eternally thankful, then I suspect that something has shifted within them for forever as well.

Folks, I think we've just witnessed in the Samaritan a personal conversion of sorts—one of those rare, once-in-a-lifetime moments spiritual clarity, where God's purpose, perhaps his very presence, in a life is revealed—like St. Paul's experience of that flash of light on the road to Damascus; or Jacob, who after dreaming of the angels ascending and descending from heaven realized that “the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it.”²

Gratitude—or better yet, *eternal thankfulness*—can transport a person to a holy place, and change a life as well...for all time.

Which brings me back to us, here in this holy place, and what we do here each and every week to express our gratitude to God.

The Samaritan cried out “have mercy,” and he was saved. And on many Sundays, as we begin our worship together, we recite the Kyrie—“Lord have mercy...Christ have mercy...Lord have

¹ The Greek word for “well” is “sesoken.”

² See Genesis 28:16.

mercy”— and with these words, our encounter with the risen Christ takes on a kind of new reality.

The Samaritan made a wholesale turn in his life and expressed eternal thanks to Jesus, which in the Greek translates as "*euchariston*." And at the altar, during Holy Eucharist, we're often reminded that "[i]t is right, and a good and *joyful* thing, always and everywhere to give *thanks* to you, Father Almighty..."

The Eucharist is where our faith is most profoundly felt and demonstrated, as we joyfully express our gratitude for the abundance of God's grace in our lives.

And after the Eucharist, but before we go back out into the world, the deacon will formally dismiss us this morning, "Go out into the world in peace...love and serve God, *rejoicing* in the power of the Spirit." The dismissal invokes the joy of our salvation. But it's also a reminder of Jesus' emphatic command to the Samaritan: "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well!"

And so, with the Samaritan's action firmly planted in our psyche and with joyful thanksgiving ringing in our ears, we'll all leave this place today and return back to our daily lives.

So let me close this morning with this question: When we leave this place, what will we do to express our eternal thanks and gratitude for all that we receive in the Eucharist? Will we carry what we received this day back into the world like the Samaritan? Or will we go back silently into the world like the other nine lepers who were healed?

The world desperately needs what we have to offer by way of our thanksgiving to the risen Lord. The world desperately needs our joy.

Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well!

Thanks be to God!