

The Grateful Samaritan

This sermon was preached at Sts. Peter and Paul on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 13th, 2019. The texts were II Kings 5 and Luke 17:11-19.

God of the sparrow / God of the whale / God of the swirling stars / How does the creature say Awe / How does the creature say Praise

God of the rainbow / God of the cross / God of the empty grave / How does the creature say Grace / How does the creature say Thanks

*God of the hungry / God of the sick / God of the prodigal /
How does the creature say Care / How does the creature say Life (ELW 740).*

In these verses from the hymn entitled, “God of the Sparrow,” a hymn which we sometimes sing on Thanksgiving Day, Jaroslav Vajda raises the question which is asked of us today, “How does the creature say Praise?... How does the creature say Thanks?... How does the creature say Life?”

It was the 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, who wrote that “Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth.” Grace happens when something good is given to us that we did not deserve. The response, one would assume, is gratitude—giving glory to God.

When someone asked Martin Luther to describe the meaning of true worship, he replied by saying that true worship is the tenth leper turning back, falling on his face at Jesus’ feet in an act of worship, and giving glory to God.

Many of us seem to think that worship is just hearing a sermon, singing an anthem, performing a selection of music, gazing at the stain-glass windows, writing a check, learning something new, or praying for something good to happen. Like almost everything else, we assume that worship is ultimately about us and how we can benefit from it.

What’s in it for me this morning?

Incidentally, if there isn’t some special role for me to play in the service here this morning, well, giving thanks in the company of others may not be quite enough reason to show up. However, worship is always Eucharist, from the word that appears in this text, meaning “to give thanks.” Protestants are prone to forget—maybe even ignore—that worship is the Eucharist. It is the Lord’s Supper. It is the Great Thanksgiving of all prayers of thanksgiving, always and chiefly about returning to give thanks, giving God the glory, falling at Jesus’ feet at the Eucharist to give thanks for God’s gift of himself in Jesus—whether you feel like it or you don’t, whether you like the hymns or you don’t, whether you care for the preaching or not, whether you like the sanctuary or you don’t like it. Worship is Eucharist.

“Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?”

This is often my question on Sunday mornings as I look out upon a broken and barren parking lot or as I standing peeking through the sacristy door, wondering how many will show today, asking myself, “Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

Here in Samaria, well out of bounds—here in the middle of no man’s land, on his way to Jerusalem—Jesus meets ten lepers. Long ago, the Levitical Code had instructed that “the leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean’...He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Leviticus 13:45, 46).

Now, as then, we put away those whose bodies and minds are disfigured and mangled—out of sight and, we hope, out of mind.

No one dares to come close to a leper. But Jesus, always and forever crossing the proscribed boundaries—in the middle of no man’s land and on his way to Jerusalem and the cross—dares to draw close to these “untouchables” all of whom are the walking dead. Then Jesus, referring to that same Levitical Code, looks at the ten lepers, tells them to go back to the temple, show themselves to the priests, and thus, reenter the communal life of their families and congregations, no longer to be isolated and alone.

This reentry to community from isolation and loneliness is always of greater significance than the healing itself. Many of you know that sickness is a lonesome place to be. You have spent time in hospitals, rehab centers, nursing facilities, and undergoing various types of therapy. And surprisingly, at the top of the list of what makes people happy is not good health but meaningful relationships.

And as they go, ten lepers were cleansed.

And as they go, only one returns for Eucharist.

Ten are cured, but only one is healed.

Ten are cleansed, but only one is saved.

I wonder whether or not there is some allusion here to the Biblical tithe, that is, giving back one tenth of what you have been given as an offering or prayer of thanksgiving—solely out of gratitude for what God has given you.

The writer of Luke makes a point again of telling us that this one leper is the least likely to say thanks. Of course, this one is a “foreigner.” The Gospel writer had made a point of telling us last summer that there was a *good Samaritan*. And now he makes sure that we know that there is also a *grateful Samaritan*. The man with at least two strikes against him—a Samaritan and a leper, and just about ready to strike out—worships God with his whole being, falling before the “new temple” whose name is Jesus since he could not join the other nine at the Jerusalem temple, although, he could return to Mt. Gerazim where other Samaritans worshiped.

Presumably the whole point of Luke’s Gospel is to get us to worship God through Jesus. Here, late in the Gospel, somebody finally gets the point. And that somebody is a “foreigner.”

Jesus Christ is Lord of all. All territory on the earth, including Galilee and Samaria and everything in between, belongs to the Lord.

God of the hungry / God of the sick / God of the prodigal / How does the creature say Care / How does the creature say Life

Sometimes it takes a “foreigner” to teach the rest of us just what it means to be grateful, possibly because we don’t recognize grace anymore. We’ve come to believe that we deserve—maybe that we have earned—everything. Of course, a “foreigner” doesn’t deserve anything; so everything is grace. Thus, there is great gratitude in the heart of such a person.

I’ve noticed so often that it is the newcomers to a congregation who express their gratitude for the church, the worship life, the fellowship, and the opportunities, while the rest of us seem only to find something to complain about. I’m thinking that maybe we who have experienced the graces of God for such a long time have forgotten that “grace and gratitude go together like heaven and earth.” Maybe the leprosy of today that leads to the aching loneliness which so many of us feel is a deep-rooted delusion that somehow I have *the right* to things; that I owe nothing to anyone; and, therefore,

I have no responsibility for anyone.

“I’m paying him to do the job, and I don’t need to say ‘Thank you.’ His paycheck is thanks enough.”

In Aesop’s fable of the Crane and the Wolf, after Crane has risked her life pulling out a sharp bone from Wolf’s throat, the moral of the story is this: “In serving the wicked, expect no reward, and be thankful if you escape injury for your pains.”

I must confess that I am often appalled at the way we treat waiters and waitresses, lawn care workers and cab drivers, cashiers and care-givers, house-keepers and gardeners, and all those whose jobs many of us would refuse to do for a living and whom we regard as “beneath us.”

I read that when Anthony Hopkins was researching his role as a butler in the film *The Remains of the Day* he interviewed a real-life butler. The butler told Hopkins that his goal in life was complete and total submissiveness—a skilled ability to blend into the woodwork of any room like a mere fixture, on a par, he said, with table lamps and fireplace irons.

Reflecting on that interview, Hopkins said that the one sentence he will never forget is when the man said that you can sum up an excellent butler in the following way: “The room seems emptier when he is in it.”

The goal is to do your work, fill your wine glasses, and clear the plates without being noticed—much less being thanked.

Routine ungratefulness makes people disappear, even those who are members of our own family, or congregation, or workplace or neighborhood. We just disappear—invisible men and women, boys and girls—when there is never a Eucharist.

To acknowledge others as a means of God’s grace, to see others who serve as fully equal to myself, to be generous in offering thanks to them—all this is to admit that maybe what I’m receiving in life has very little to do with my accomplishments. Maybe it all has to do with God’s grace and goodness.

“Grace and gratitude go together. Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth.”

As the Westminster Catechism famously asks with its opening question and answer, “What is the chief goal of human life?”

The chief goal of human life is “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

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