

Wesley United Methodist Church

October 9, 2016

“...For It Is Seemly So To Do.”

Luke 17:11-19

I can recall three questions that were asked of us throughout our childhood. The first was, “Were you born in a pig pen?” That usually came when our room wasn’t cleaned. I shared my bedroom with two sisters... The second was, “Is there a burlap sack in front of the door?” That usually came when we left the door open. The third was, “Have you forgotten something?” We heard that for not saying thank you after receiving a gift.

Which is what I thought of when I read the Scripture for this morning from Luke’s gospel; the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers. Only one comes back to give thanks. Ten were healed, but only the Samaritan came back. If my mother had been there, she would have said to the nine, “Have you forgotten something?”

Read Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

It is a remarkable story. All the more so when you examine the details. For example, look at the setting. It’s along the Samaritan border. Jesus was walking between Samaria and Galilee. Jesus is close to the border. He is dangerously close to the border, across which no Jew was to travel, and close to which no respectable Jew would ever be seen. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. But Jesus is about to have one, for here comes a band of lepers.

Lepers were ostracized legally. They couldn’t enter villages or cities. They had to stay out on the borders of life. They were to get out of the way on the road if they saw somebody coming toward them, so that person would not have to encounter a leper. They were to cry “Unclean! Unclean!” to warn people to stay clear of the contaminated area.

Jesus is walking along the border. Some lepers approach him. But instead of shouting, “Unclean!” they shout “Jesus, Master have mercy on us.” Which is not the cry of the leper, but the cry of a penitent. It is the title the disciples used for Jesus. It is not what lepers would say.

Jesus says to the lepers, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Once again Jesus is following the law in Leviticus, which read that if you were healed from some disease that had ostracized you from the community, you had to go to the priests. The priests would certify that you were healed, so that you could be restored to your place in the community again. So, “go show yourselves to the priests.”

But here is the twist. Jesus tells them “go show yourselves to the priests,” before they are healed. It hasn’t happened yet. The text says, “While they were on their way they were healed.” Luke has given us a marvelous model of faith. Faith means going on, anticipating that what is promised to us is going to be fulfilled. Or better yet, faith means, I have part in my healing. It is not going to happen, my life is not going to change, if I just sit still. You get up and start going.

Remember, last week I talked about faith as big as a mustard seed is enough and that we need to make that first step in faith... We need to trust God and move in the right direction.

God’s part is up to God. We have nothing to do with that. Our part is to assume that God is already at work, even if we cannot discern it. God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. Our role is to start out, keep on going, never give up, and see what happens.

Donald Streater graduated from Georgetown Law School when he was forty-seven years old. For twenty-three of his forty-seven years he was an alcoholic and a drug addict. At thirteen he had his first drink. At fifteen he smoked his first marijuana. At eighteen he began shooting heroin into his arm. From the time he was eighteen his life was a series of prisons, and rehabilitation programs, none of which worked. At thirty-six he went to an AA meeting, like the ones that are held here in this church. After the meeting, as is the practice in AA, someone called him and invited him to come back. Streater said, “No. I’ve got some business that I have to take care of.” The caller was wise in the way of alcoholics, and as he heard that before. He said, “If you don’t do something, you ain’t going nowhere.” Then he added this, “If you want something different, you have to do something different.” Streater resented that advice. “What right does he have to tell me how to run my life.” He ignored the advice. Except, he couldn’t get rid of it. It continued to haunt him. Later on he was taken to the hospital because he had a cardiac arrest from an injection of heroin. A few days later he was released.

Then it happened. He said it wasn’t that the skies opened, or anything like that, but that voice kept haunting him. “If you want something different, you have to do something different...you have to do something different.”

That morning he walked out of the house, on his way to the corner liquor store, which was his habit in the morning, to get a bottle. Only this time he walked right by the liquor store on the corner, praying all the while, “I want this out of my life.” He walked to his step-father’s house. His step-father took him to the hospital.

He admitted himself, and spent ten months in a rehabilitation program.

He came out clean and dry. He went to college. He went to law school at Georgetown.

Because of his notoriety, the press was there at the graduation.

They interviewed him. He said, "Everything that has happened to me has helped me. You look back and you can see it. We are part of something that is bigger than we are. There is some purpose in our lives."

Well, that's a great story. It happens all the time. People are healed. People are freed from bondage by a power that is greater than themselves. When it's over they recognize, I did not do this by myself.

God has a wonderful plan for everybody. God wants you to live. Having faith in that means that you start moving toward what is promised right now. "While they were on their way they were healed."

The climax of this story comes in another detail. Only one of the ten comes back to give thanks, and it was a Samaritan, the foreigner, the least likely. It was the one that everyone assumed was uncivilized, uncultured, unenlightened, the last one you would expect to do this. Once again the hero of the story is a Samaritan. Jesus is always lifting up unlikely people to be the models for the religious. He who is least likely is the model for us. Luke is saying to us, if a Samaritan, whom we consider to be an outcast, knows what to do upon receiving God's grace, how much more should we who are surrounded by God's grace live lives of thanksgiving.

This is also a good text this time of year when we get ready to talk about stewardship. Perhaps the most easily understood motivation for stewardship is to give thanks. As Christians, above all others, we should give thanks. That is why we present an offering every Sunday morning. It is a way of saying thanks.

Luke tells us to go out in faith, and come back in thanksgiving.

One of my favorite hymns is "Old 100." You want the old hymns, well, here is your chance. This one is about as old as it gets. It goes back to the reformation, to the 16th century. It's called "Old 100," because it was in the old psalter of the Scottish Presbyterian Church. The second and third verses go like this:

Know that the Lord is God indeed;
Without our aid he did us make;
We are his folk, he doth us feed,
And for his sheep he doth us take.

O enter then his gates with praise
Approach with joy his courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless his name always,
For it is seemly so to do.

Do you know what that word "seemly" means? It's a great word. "Seemly" means "good manners." It is what your mother taught you.

"Have you forgotten something?"

A husband and wife, getting ready to go to a memorial service for the son of a friend of theirs. The son had been killed in the war. His parents gave a generous gift to the church, \$50,000 for a stained glass window, as a memorial for their son who was killed. The woman said to her husband, "What a beautiful thing to do." Then she turned to her husband, and said, "What are we going to give?" He said, "What are you talking about? We don't need to give anything. Our son came back from the war alive." "That's what I mean," she said. "They lost a son, and they are giving a gift of thanks, a memorial to his life. We got our son back, and we don't give anything."

I think that's why Luke remembered this incident in Jesus' life. That's why he told it, to bring it home to us. We, like those lepers, are to go out in faith, surrounded by grace, and then come back in thanksgiving, and give thanks. "For it is seemly so to do."