

“An Odd Salvation” GPPC 10-13-19
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, Luke 17:11-19

So we retrace the story briefly, just to pick up a few details. Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem where he would give his life for the world. And on the way he passed through a region between Samaria and Galilee.

Jesus entered a village and ten lepers approached him. We don't know what kind of leprosy each leper had, whether it was a minor skin disease or the dreaded Hansen's disease that could cause the loss of limbs or even eventual death. We don't know what they had, just that they had some sort of skin disease. They were afflicted.

And we know what was expected of them. They were to stay at a distance from other people who were “clean.” And they were even to warn others of their presence by yelling, “Unclean! Unclean!” over and over to keep other people safe from their uncleanness. That was the protocol for them. Because they were afflicted, they were also excluded.

Have you ever felt something like that in your own life? Excluded from others or from the rights that others enjoyed simply because of

Jeff Paschal

your sexual orientation or your skin color or your economic status or your marital status or your education? Have you ever been excluded? It is a lonely feeling, isn't it?

These lepers may have felt that loneliness themselves. But as Jesus came into the village they approached him. They kept their distance (as required by the law), yet they also approached him. And they did not approach him yelling, "Unclean! Unclean!" No. They approached him with a bold request, practically a demand. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

They called Jesus "Master," and they dared to tell him to have mercy on them. So they must have heard something about this Jesus already. They must have had at least enough faith, or maybe just enough hope to cry out to him for help.

And Luke says Jesus "saw" them. He didn't just look past them or ignore them. He *saw* them, and said, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." That was the proper procedure. In the event that your leprosy went away, that's what you would do. You'd go to the priests and get an official declaration that you were cured. And if you were cured, then you

Jeff Paschal

could leave the leper colony and go back and be with your family. Maybe get a job. Maybe enjoy your kids or have some kids. Hang around with other people. When the priests declared that you were cured, all of that could happen.

So they went, and as they went they were healed, all ten of them were healed. But one of them did not follow Jesus' instructions, at least not to the letter or at least not right away. You see he did not go straight to the priests, as ordered. And this is where the story takes an odd turn, figuratively and literally.

This one leper, when he saw he'd been healed, turned back--the Greek carries the sense of retracing his steps. (François Bovon, *Luke 2*, Hermeneia Series, 505.) He retraced his steps to Jesus, all the while praising God with a loud voice. Then he threw himself down at the feet of Jesus (the posture of someone before a king or before a mediator of God). And he thanked Jesus.

And Luke says simply, "he was a Samaritan." He was an outsider. Jews and Samaritans of the time hated each other, a longstanding feud. And, lest we forget, Jesus was a Jew. Jesus healed this Samaritan

Jeff Paschal

anyway, but he had questions. “Weren’t ten people made clean? Where are the other nine? Just this one person, a foreigner, coming back and giving praise to God?”

So why didn’t the others come back and give thanks? Did they just forget? Did they take their healing for granted? Were they going to come back and give praise to God another time? We don’t know.

We just know Jesus got the last word here, and it was a strange word, a word that gets us asking even more questions. Jesus said to the Samaritan, this man healed of his leprosy, “Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

“Your *faith* has made you well.” Wait. What?

All ten of the lepers were healed. And they weren’t really healed by their faith. More accurately *God*, working through Jesus, actually brought the healing. So why did Jesus say to this one former leper, this Samaritan, outsider, foreigner, “your *faith* has made you well”? It could also be translated as “your faith has saved you” or “your faith has rescued you.” What did you Jesus mean by that?

Jeff Paschal

Maybe what Jesus was saying is that there is a surface kind of faith, say, an intellectual acknowledgement of the existence of God and the existence of Jesus. Or maybe there's a faith that says, "I know God loves me." And then that faith stops right there.

But there's also another kind of faith, a deeper kind of faith that doesn't just acknowledge the existence of God and Jesus as an interesting proposition. And it doesn't just stop at, "I know God loves me." No. There is another kind of faith that goes deeper and that is faith shaped by thanksgiving to God. Faith that is permeated by gratitude. And that is the kind of faith that saves us.

Reading the Greensboro *News & Record* newspaper the other day, there was an article about gun violence in Charlotte. People are grabbing guns and shooting other people over minor disputes. As you may know, I believe better gun regulation is an important part of responding to this epidemic of gun violence sweeping our country. You are free to disagree with me and we can still be friends.

But this article was not about gun regulation. Instead, one person the columnist interviewed was "a community organizer and volunteer

Jeff Paschal

who works with youth...” [He said about the youth] “At the heart of it is a need to figure out their purpose in life...If you don’t have a purpose, then you crumble to your own demise. I’ve never seen anyone who knows their purpose rob a bank or shoot someone. It’s a school effort, a home effort, a judicial effort.” (Greensboro News & Record, “A trend: People are reaching for weapons to solve minor disputes,” October 7, 2019) And we might add, a church effort.

All week long, hour after hour, the outside world tells us what our purpose in life is—retiree, worker, customer, teacher, student, spouse, friend, whatever it may be. But God in Christ tells us that we have a greater, over-arching purpose. Our life’s purpose is to respond to God with faithful thanks. It is an indispensable part of our humanity. A professor even wondered whether “humans can survive as humans without worshiping. To withhold acknowledgment, to avoid celebration, to stifle gratitude, may prove as unnatural as holding one’s breath.”

(Kimberly Bracken Long quoting John E. Burkhart in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4.*, 168.)

Jeff Paschal

So we come in here on Sundays and practice that thanksgiving again and again with study and worship. This is what we teach our children and youth. And it's what we teach our adults. It's what we learn and relearn again and again. Our life's purpose is to respond to God with faithful thanks in whatever we're doing. It's also one thing that saves us.

Episcopalian writer Deborah Smith Douglas says, "Several years ago, at the invitation of an old friend, I joined her in an unusual e-mail correspondence: every day, we agreed, we would exchange short lists of particular things in our lives for which we were grateful. 'Particular' was mandatory: no vague generalizations about good health or pleasant weather were allowed. Our identified blessings might be small, but they had to be specific: a ripe peach at breakfast, a family quarrel resolved, a finch's nest discovered outside the kitchen window, a lost letter found, a tedious task accomplished...[The writer concludes that] focusing our attention on our blessings can, as research now demonstrates, yield increased energy and optimism, better physical health, relief of depression, and measurable progress toward personal goals...We began to be *more* grateful, more cheerful, more patient with others and

Jeff Paschal

ourselves. Gratitude, in other words, ‘works.’” (Deborah Smith Douglas,

“Thanks be to God: Gratitude as Prayer of Adoration” *Weavings*, March/April, 2008, 6-8.)

Or as Jesus put it, “Your faith has saved you.”

How might you and I apply this in our own lives? Maybe, like Deborah Smith Douglas, we would find a partner and exchange daily email thankfulness lists that have to be specific, not general. (And you can’t say, “Thank you, God, for strong coffee” more than once!) You have to try to find something new to be thankful for each day.

Or maybe we would keep a brief, but specific gratitude journal on our own.

Maybe we will increase how often we take part in Sunday worship.

Maybe we will read the daily newspaper or web news sites and not only lament the brokenness and injustice we see but also give thanks for signs of hope from God.

I do not wish to be a Pollyanna or lay guilt on anybody who is going through a really hard time right now. But some of us might find it helpful in the midst of very stressful or deeply painful times simply to look for one or two things a day that we are thankful for, in spite of what

Jeff Paschal

we are suffering. Maybe it would be one kind word offered to us. Or medicines that help. Or some empathy for others that we are gaining as we go through our ordeal. Again, I don't think it's fair to try to force this thankfulness on someone or to make people feel guilty if that are not feeling thankful. But for some of us a focus on thankfulness during stress and suffering may be a gift, a saving kind of gift.

All ten of the lepers were healed. But one leper, a Samaritan, an unexpected outsider, received a second healing, a healing that came when he returned to fall at the feet of Jesus and give thanks. Jesus said to him (as Jesus says to those who follow his example), "Get up and go your way; your faith has saved you." Amen. ©Jeff Paschal