

Sermon: C Proper 23 2016
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods
9 October 2016
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Jeremiah 29:1, 40-7
Luke 17:11-19
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Psalm 66:1-11

Evacuating from New Orleans as Katrina bore down on us and then being displaced for over two months is as close to being a refugee as I hope I ever come. Hurricane Katrina was the scariest experience I've ever had--I never want to repeat it--but also grace-filled in some wonderful ways.

People were kind, taking us in for weeks at a time, putting up with our fatigue and stressed out psyches. Residents of Baton Rouge offered generous hospitality to New Orleanians that caused immense traffic problems for all of us. Tempers flared. Grocery stores ran out of food. Displaced high school students worried about graduating. Schools that opened their doors were filled to overflowing. Hospitality came at considerable cost. It was a hard time for everybody, but looking back, I have nothing but gratitude for the folks in Baton Rouge who took us in and for God who sustained us all through the ordeal.

Following Katrina a lot of emotions surfaced. As people drifted back into the City some got to work cleaning up while others became so seriously depressed they gave up and then died or went to live elsewhere. A lot of blaming was heard: The Corps of Engineers caused this flood with their faulty levees! Global Warming did this! Some even said it was God's judgment on a sinful city! Anger was everywhere. Anger is a common response when one's life is turned upside down, but anger didn't get us through the experience or rebuild New Orleans; people's faith in God's never-ending love did.

Being driven out of one's home is terrible, but I have no doubt that being forced into exile by an invading army is far worse than running from a hurricane. When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Israel he forced the Jewish leadership into exile in Babylon. Understandably God's people were despondent and angry--their lives disrupted, their land taken over by a despot. Surprisingly, the prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God in his letter to the exiles, encourages them to settle in in Babylon and enjoy the place! He speaks of the exile as part of God's plan and reminds them that they are as dependent on the welfare of Babylon as the Babylonians! "It all seems unspeakably terrible, but maybe it isn't! God is with you even in exile. Make the best of it!" said Jeremiah. And they did.

The Babylonians gave the exiles a place to live in the city and were kind to them. Grateful for Babylonian hospitality, the Israelites worshiped as they wished; got their holy stories written down for the first time and flourished, even while they yearned to be back home. Compared to the experience of refugees today the New Orleans exodus and Babylonian exile seem like walks in the park, although some of the personal issues are the same: displaced people need a place to go, need to be taken in by others, cared for.

Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, did the unexpected thing in opening the doors of Germany to exiles from all over the Middle East. It has not been easy and there are many detractors. The decision has cost her much support, but she has stuck by it, realizing the extreme need of the refugees and the need for Germans to prove, perhaps even to themselves, that they are capable of compassion and hospitality to people in terrible circumstances whose culture differs from that of most Europeans. Merkel's faith in God and in the German people led her to this risky policy decision--a decision of the heart, not of impersonal, political calculation. It raises some questions for us followers of Jesus.

What does it take to move a person to follow his or her heart against the expectations of others who are driven by fear of change or taking risks? What can bring about the move from anger to gratitude as Jeremiah urged? There are no easy answers to these questions, but Jesus, in the curious story of the 10 lepers in today's Gospel suggests an approach that is appealing.

Being cast out of one's family and community because of a debilitating disease was surely a devastating experience--a terrible exile. Being cured of leprosy by Jesus was surely the most liberating and wonderful experience a person could possibly have! It is what happens next that fascinates me: In order to be reinstated into the community, a Hebrew priest needed to pass judgment on the wellness of the individual, so Jesus sent the 10 cured lepers off to be declared healthy and welcomed back into family life. But one turned back to Jesus, falling at his feet in gratitude. It is easy to look at the nine who followed directions, did the expected thing, and wonder why they didn't thank Jesus. It's that 10th leper who risked following his heart and threw himself at Jesus feet that interests me.

So often we, as the church, as people of faith, fail to follow our hearts, sticking to the rules and expectations of others in fear of what might happen if

we dare risk doing what is needed to make God's reign real for others. Gratitude for God's never-ending love is the starting point, not the outcome, of a faithful life lived in hope. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, but gratitude today for all that God provides will help us face whatever comes along. Being thankful is preparation for stepping out in faith and taking the kind of risk that can truly make a difference.

The 10th leper got it right. Offering himself to God in thanksgiving he heard Jesus' voice say "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." What wonderful words and it all began with gratitude. May it be so with us, as well.