

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 23 – Year C – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony- 10-9-22
You may have noticed that the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel today are tied together by the theme of Leprosy. We think of Leprosy as Hansen’s disease, but in the ancient world, Leprosy was any skin disease. Such skin disease made a person ritually unclean and because such uncleanness was contagious, it also made them social outcasts. When and if the disease disappeared or was healed the person went to the priest to be declared ritually pure and able to re-enter society. But there is a deeper theme here present. If we take together the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel side by side, there emerges a theme of expectation and gratitude. Watch closely and it becomes apparent that the expectations are held by those with power and control. They are the ones who in some way feel as sense of entitlement. Those who have less earthly power are those who demonstrate faith, trust in God and gratitude. The slave girl, and Naaman’s servants, while they have less obvious power have a greater power in their faith and trust in God. It is out of this greater power that their expectations come to be fulfilled.

Naaman was a powerful general. He had led the armies of the King of Aram against Israel and he had won spectacular victories. He was successful, wealthy and strong in human terms. But, that he suffered from a loathsome disease with no known cure. In spite of all of his power, wealth and success there seemed to be no cure. He had no hope, until a captured Israelite slave girl suggested he go to see the prophet in Samaria, the prophet Elijah. Faith and trust in God are what led her to risk speaking up. Her expectation was in the power of God to heal through the prophet in Samaria.

Naaman was desperate and so after some diplomatic maneuvering, he presented himself with his army, his horses and his chariots at the entrance to Elijah’s house. Naaman’s expectation was that Elijah would be impressed, come out, do special magic and cure his leprosy. Instead, Elijah sent a messenger instead of coming himself. The message was simple; “go wash in the Jordan seven times and your skin will be healed.” Naaman, that important and powerful man was livid. Surely, he deserved better, surely the rivers of Aram were better than the Jordan. He resolved not to follow the advice of Elijah. Here again the less powerful, the weaker, the servants intercede and convince Naaman to let go of his anger and his unfulfilled expectations and pride. They convince him to do as the prophet instructed. The result was healing and an expression of gratitude to God. “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.” Naaman was grateful.

Elijah intentionally sent a message rather than coming himself. His instructions were simple even mundane, simply wash in the river seven times. No magic, no incantations, no difficult or costly treatments. This made it clear that it was not the prophet, not the instructions not even the river Jordan that healed, it was God. The one’s through whom God worked to enable this healing were a captured slave girl and Naaman’s own servants who encouraged him to do as the prophet had instructed. God truly works in mysterious ways God’s wonders to perform.

And then we come to the 10 lepers who Jesus met on the road to Jerusalem, one Samaritan, and 9 who were presumably Jews. They were all outcasts because of their disease, the Samaritan doubly so because not only was he diseased but part of a despised religious and political group. They approached Jesus asking for mercy. Mercy can take many forms. In this case Jesus did not as he had in many instances, heal the infirmity. He simply instructed them to

go and show themselves to the priests. They were still afflicted with the leprosy, nothing had changed. They turned and went on their way, and as they did so they were made clean. The Samaritan recognized a gift when he saw and experienced it and he returned to give thanks. Just as in the case of Naaman, no special effects, simply the instruction to go and in doing so all ten were made clean. This is not a story primarily about healing. This is a story about gratitude. One, the Samaritan, turned back praising God. Approaching Jesus he fell at Jesus feet and thanked him. In doing so, he became not only clean but well. What changed for the Samaritan was not only an outward and visible healing, not only social acceptance. What changed for the Samaritan was a new and deeper relationship with Jesus a relationship based on the love and grace of God. In that act of gratitude, the Samaritan entered into a life of faith. What brought him to Jesus with his nine companions was an expectation that Jesus who had healed others would heal him. When expectation was realized and was followed by gratitude, faith became real. Gratitude and faith are followed by trust in God. Each time we are honestly grateful for the grace of God in our lives, our faith deepens. With deeper faith, we are able to trust more fully in God's grace. It is a circle a cycle. Gratitude, faith, trust, leads to more experiences for which thanks are offered, which increases our faith...and so it goes. This is what the other nine lepers missed. They were healed but not made well.

The Bible uses the terms or concepts of wellness, wholeness and salvation almost interchangeable. In that understanding salvation becomes not so much as the ticket to escape hell in the future as it does the ticket to a life of faith and gratitude here and now. When Jesus tells the Samaritan that it is his faith that has made him well, Jesus is telling him that his whole life, not only his physical well-being, his whole life had changed. As has been said by one scripture scholar:

"It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith." Gratitude and faith are inextricable bound together. This is the lesson that Naaman and the Samaritan learned. It is the wisdom that the Israelite slave girl and the servants of Naaman knew.

We have gathered here this morning to share worship and Eucharist. Eucharist, the root meaning of the word is Thanksgiving. If you listen with newly attuned ears as we pray the Great Thanksgiving, you can hear in a new way the words of gratitude to God.

God calls us to live eucharistic lives, lives of thanksgiving and lives of joy. Imagine the expression on the face of Naaman when he found his skin clear and was able to acknowledge the power of the living God. Imagine the joy on the face of the Samaritan when he looked up into face of Jesus and knew that his life had been changed from outcast to beloved of God.

To practice gratitude intentionally in all things changes the individual's life in profound ways. Faith becomes deeper, trust becomes that on which we can rely, and gratitude increases our joy in living. Gratitude changes the character of a congregation as well. When a congregation practices gratitude for the grace of God in their midst, giving becomes not a duty but a response for what is has been given us. Worship changes as well. People come not for what they might "get out of the message" so much as they come to praise and sing, to experience the joy of each other and to be thankful. The mission of the congregation changes too. Rather than acts of generosity, kindness and service because that's "what Christians do", mission and ministry becomes the work of many hands and hearts to make the world the place that God intends it to be. Prayer continues to be petitions, asking, but becomes thanksgiving for what we have received as well. To this end in a few minutes we will come to the Prayers of

the People. They are different this day, they are all prayers of thanksgiving. It is an experiment see if it brings a sense of joy and peace to your hearts. Intentionally practicing gratitude as a congregation, as part of the Body of Christ, you will see your faith increase, your trust deepen and your joy expand. I promise.

I like refrigerator magnets and bumper stickers. They are pithy ways of reminding me of things that are true. This isn't a refrigerator magnet but it well could be. It comes from the Presbyterians. "In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to live holy and joyful lives." From this day forward!