

REFLECTIONS

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

"As We Go... and Change Follows"

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A Reflection on the story of the healing of the ten lepers

The Gospel of Luke, Chapter 17, verses 11-19

"On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

May God add our understanding... and our wonder... and our questions... to the reading of these words.

One of my mentors in ministry urged us to look at the stories of Scripture with three different lenses: what is happening in the text; how is this text happening in the world around us; and... sometimes the hardest and easiest to dismiss lens... how is this story an inner event? How is it happening in me, in my life? This is not about veering into narcissism; on the contrary. It is about not having the luxury of keeping the story at arm's length, not seeing it solely as something that happened "back there, then." It's about holding it like a mirror... and not looking away. About being curious.

I will come back to what is happening in the text itself in a few minutes. What can so quickly jump out from this story are the real world implications... then and now.

Leprosy, then: uncleanness... impurity, an obvious and visible distance from God... and from others, as poet and pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes has pointed out. Only a priest could pronounce you clean. A visible and scary affliction.

Lepers, now: We have expanded the definition since those days. Alas, we don't have to look too far to find the current words for "lepers." Whole groups of citizens of other countries called rapists or criminals; caging immigrant children; movements to take away rights and health care from transgendered people; the endlessly creative ways current politics turns human souls into "others" worthy of fear... contempt... and worse. And the ease with which social media can target people makes hatred spread with terrifying speed.

I am remembering Ethel's excellent sermon from a couple of weeks ago that began with a phone conversation with a woman taking issue with the rainbow flag outside the church, a complaint born not of the life-giving SPC "We Choose Welcome" here but of

that strong need to demonize, to “other-ize,” to create and name and spurn lepers of our own devising.

I would love to say I know nothing about that angry woman on the phone. I think the pride flag should be in every church, and would not feel comfortable in a church that did not have one.

But to use both the cultural lens for this story and the personal one, I found myself wondering: how does our culture “name” and target the lepers of our day? Who are the so-called lepers now? Who decides? It can be depressingly easy to look for all the ways groups are targeted, demeaned, threatened, even killed. Rhetoric, especially white nationalist, is deadly.

And me? As a member of society? Who, in the privacy of my heart, do I think of... not necessarily as “lepers,” but as... *what*? Of course I don’t target and demean, I tell myself, but what are my words that just might make someone “other”? Do I say “different,” or “scary,” or “strange,” or “stupid”? And when I do, is this ever justified? Human? Understandable? How much of it is fear-based? Not comfortable questions.

Sometimes our shifts in self-perspective come unexpectedly. When acclaimed author, professor and preacher Henri Nouwen left the Ivy League and moved into a L’Arche community in Toronto, he became one of many people living 24/7 alongside people with physical and mental disabilities, some of those afflictions profound. No one cared who he was or what he had done before; they *did* care if he could be present, and could simply love and be loved and help tend to the physical needs of those who needed it. Living there for the rest of his life changed Nouwen profoundly. He said his writing shifted from his head to his heart; everything was flowing from a different center.

This Gospel story asks to look at our outward gaze, yes, and see where we reflexively divide people. But remember that last lens... how is this story also an inner event, a mirror? Depth psychology would talk about shadow work; looking at the parts we most want to dis-own, the places of the most shame, visible like leprosy or invisible and known only to us. I think shadow work is at the heart of the Scripture lines that say “Be ye perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Rather than terrify us with unattainable sinlessness, the usual interpretation, this injunction, this word “perfect” actually translates as “whole,” “complete.” Ah. That would include, well, everything.

As writer James Hollis has said: “The challenging paradox remains: We will never experience healing until we can come to love our unlovable places, for they, too, ask love of us.”

Arthur Miller stated this challenge to ourselves vividly in his play *After the Fall*: “I had the same dream each night—that I had a child, and even in the dream I saw that the child was my life; and it was an idiot, and I ran away. Until I thought, if I could kiss it... perhaps I could rest. And I bent to its broken face, and it was horrible... but I kissed it. *I think one must finally take one’s life in one’s arms.*”

As the Martin Smith quote in the bulletin assures, the Spirit dwells “with and among and between *all* the selves of your self.” Holding all our parts, walk them into the story and notice an interesting part of the sequence here: “...they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ *And as they went, they were made clean.*”

Technically, at the time, the priests did the healing. Not in this story. I suddenly noticed the timing of the healing, not by the priests, but in some infinitely more mysterious way, after Jesus speaks, and before they even get to the official mediators.

Yes, they first had to cry out, to take that initiative. But they were made clean... healed... *"as they went."* Not before... not after asking... and, especially, not when they got to the guys officially in charge, but AS they went.

In Mary Oliver's classic poem "The Wild Geese," she says "You do not have to be good... You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." Poet David Whyte, commenting on this verse, calls it the "10,000-mile *only*." Those times when to do that one thing, say that one thing, is huge. The times we are healed, surprised, lifted up and out... but only *as* we go. Only when we take that step. The "10,000-mile *as*." What might that step be for you today? Tomorrow? What do you already know in your life of having made such a step?

Back to the text: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice."

Many a good sermon has been offered on why only one person said thank you on the spot. Jesus here says, basically, hey, where are the other nine? They were also made clean. Good point. Much to chew on.

But what jumped out at me that I had never seen before was the sequencing: The one who turned back and praised God did so *when he saw that he was healed*.

Ah. All the times the amazing or longed-for thing has happened but we don't or won't or can't see it yet. Tons you could say here, about faith, gratitude, foreigners, i.e. the Samaritan, etc. But I love this: "Amid the various ecclesial, ethical, and liturgical reforms of the sixteenth century, Martin Luther was once asked to describe the nature of true worship. His answer: the tenth leper turning back." (David Lose, Preaching This Week, *WorkingPreacher.org*, 2010.)

Showing ourselves. Helping the outcast in our midst. Speaking out against those who denigrate and cast out. Moving into our own "as they went." Praising. Our beloved poet-in-almost-residence Steve Garnaas-Holmes sends us forth in this poem I will close with:

Jesus sends lepers to the priest
to show him they are healed—
before they are healed!
It's only as they go they are made well.

Jesus seems pretty confident.
They must be, too, or they wouldn't be going.

Take for yourself this confidence:
that God wishes you well,
and that it shall be so.

What afflicts you now
will not determine you.

Already your blessing is decreed.
Go and show yourself.

Amen.

Jeananne Stine

Good Morning. Praise God!

2nd Timothy, Chapter 2, verses 8-15

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with hi; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Are you ready?

We are about to welcome our new pastor, Gusti Linnea Newquist, to SPC, and that is my question for you:

Are you ready?

Are we ready?

Your first reaction may be: Yes! I'm so ready! I can't wait to meet our new pastor! And, I understand that reaction. I feel the same way. But, change can be difficult. It's different and new. It can be strange, change.

Are we ready?

Jill Duffield, an editor for The Presbyterian Outlook, writes a lectionary commentary each week. In this this week's editorial, she writes: "Nothing will stop the earth-shattering, boundary breaking, assumption upending, religious rule bending, human comfort zone shattering Word of God. The question is: How will we respond when it runs counter to our rigid expectations and treasured beliefs?"

It's a question for each of us to think about.

Our new pastor is not Randy Tremba. She is not Bill Sitterly. She is coming to us with her own life experience and history. So, what happens when she presents a new idea for our church?

Are we ready?

I have been through this losing a beloved pastor and welcoming a new one experience before. When the pastor of my church in Baltimore retired after 27 years, it was very sad for many people. He had been a hero to many as a community activist and a wonderful pastor.

I was serving on Session at the time with a guy who he had baptized. That's something that many of you at SPC can identify with. I said to my mother at the time "I don't know who we're going to find to replace him" and she said "Jesus Christ".

Well, that didn't happen, but When our new minister was presented, he was confirmed by a unanimous vote, just like here with Gusti. We were thrilled to welcome our new pastor. He arrived as the Maryland legislative session was about to begin and marriage equality was on the docket for that term.

My church in Baltimore had been a More Light Church for twenty years, one of the first, so this was an issue that was important for us.

So, here's what happened.

On one of the first Sundays of our new pastor's ministry with us, he announced from the pulpit that until everyone could get married in the church, he was not going to marry anyone. This surprised everyone, including our Session and Clerk of Session, which was me.

His stand was an admirable one that demonstrates how important the issue was to him but people were very upset. There were meetings behind closed doors. Lots of ranting and raving. It was not a happy time and it surprised me because, I thought we were supportive of marriage equality.

This led to a long process of discernment and study, much like has been done here in the past. It's what sent me to my first General Assembly in 2008.

Ten years later, that new minister is a popular member of the Baltimore Presbytery and leads a progressive church within a great music program that serves a free meal to the community every Sunday evening. So, although there was some strife in the beginning, it all worked out well.

So, I ask you again: Are you ready?

When the first challenge to "the way we've always done things" comes, are you ready for it?

Ann Duffield in her article in the Presbyterian Outlook writes the following: "If we can set aside our wrangling, our need to be right, our vindictive urges and our unspoken hope for karma rather than grace for others, we will discover the abundant, good community for all people."

So, are we ready? Can we do it?

Can we welcome our new pastor to this School of Love and continue our work together for abundant good community for all people? Are we prepared to face change with an expectation to listen and learn and work together if the road gets bumpy?

Well, we've done it before and I think that we can do it again. We can learn and grow and love together even when the work is tough.

Are you ready?