

SLD10.10.10 28th Ordinary World Communion
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 17:11-19
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"My Religion Is Gratitude"

Our story this morning opens with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Week after week, the gospel of Luke has Jesus traveling a little further toward his destiny, teaching his disciples as he goes. As we know, once in Jerusalem, Jesus will suffer and die, so his time with his disciples is growing short. After his death, as a sign of God's healing power for all creation, he will also be resurrected. But we're not there yet, and neither are his early disciples. And so, as they approach Jerusalem, Jesus keeps teaching and modeling his truth in an effort to prepare his disciples for what is coming.

In today's text, Jesus enters a village somewhere north of Jerusalem and a gaggle of lepers approaches him. There are ten of them coming near, though not *too* near, in accordance with the law. So from their proscribed distance, the lepers holler out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Jesus responds by telling the lepers to go to show themselves to the priests at the synagogue. This, too, is in accordance with the law. In Leviticus 13:49 it is written that "if the disease... is a leprous disease (meaning any number of skin diseases), then it shall be shown to the priest." The priest will then examine the symptoms to determine whether the disease is infectious. If it is contagious, and therefore a threat to the community, he will pronounce the new, marginalized status of the patient, as well as prescribes the appropriate ritual remedies, in keeping with the belief that outer illness is a reflection of inner evil.

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" holler the lepers. "Show yourselves to the

priests” advises Jesus.

Only, what do you know but that on their way to the synagogue, before the lepers even *get* to the priests, they discover that they are already healed! Cured of their symptoms and restored to health! Cured, too, of the stigma associated with their disease, and restored to their community!

At which point they all....

Well, Luke doesn't tell us what they all do then. Though I'm thinking , ten miserable outcast suddenly made whole – surely there's amazement, delight, a bunch of whooping and hollering, maybe a jig or two. But Luke doesn't say. He only comments on one of the lepers at that point, the one who turns back to Jesus, and, prostrates himself with gratitude at Jesus feet.

Looking down at the lily-skinned guy laughing and sobbing at his feet, Jesus scratches his head. "What's the deal? Weren't *ten* lepers made clean? What's become of the other nine? How come this *Samaritan* (of all people) is the only one I see?" Nobody tells Jesus, either, what's become of the other nine. What do you think?

They went on about their business? They went home to tell their families of their good fortune? Leprosy resolved, they visited their accountants to see if there's anything to be done about their flagging retirement accounts? Luke doesn't say.

But Jesus says to the grateful man at his feet: "Get up and go on your way. Go on about your business. Get on with your life. Your faith has made you well."

Not interestingly, "*I* have made you well," but "*your faith,*" *your response to me*, "has made you well." Not what *I've* done, but how you've received it, how you've understood it, how you've responded to it and lived out of it. Your attitude, your awareness, your

gratitude, and the actions flowing out of that gratitude, Jesus seems to be saying to the healed leper, has made you well.

Like all of Luke's miracle stories, this one reveals Jesus' extraordinary power for healing, to be sure. It's just that, at this point in the gospel, healing miracles are not actually something all that new for the folks hanging around Jesus. By this time in Luke's narrative, already Jesus has healed a crippled woman, a woman with a hemorrhage, a man with dropsy, a man with a withered hand, a paralytic, a boy with a demon...Peter's mother-in-law.

Then again, healing *lepers*, now, *that's* got to be pretty exceptional! Well, yeah, but actually, Jesus *had* already healed a leper back in chapter 5. *And* the servant of the enemy, a Roman soldier. *And* a dead boy. *And* an adulterer. Seeing Jesus run roughshod through religious and social boundaries really isn't all that new, either, to chapter 17's crowd.

What distinguishes this story is not so much the miracle of Jesus' power to heal as the clear affirmation of the response of the healed one. The spotlight of this story is less on the fact that Jesus *can* heal; to this crowd, that's a given by now. Or even *whom* he chooses to heal; you gotta imagine the disciples have gotten by now Jesus' inclination to tend to the "least of these." The spotlight in *this* story is on the hoped for response and actions of the healed ones. This tale in Luke is less about whether or not the lepers are candidates for healing – in first century Palestine, they are untouchables. Or whether or not they *deserve* to be healed – in their shrouds and at their distance, Jesus probably can't tell one from another. This story highlights the attitude and behavior of the healed ones *once they're already healed*.

I've preached before about how well this text illustrates Reformed Theology, how well it mirrors what we Presbyterians believe. For we, too, don't spend too much debating whether or not Jesus has the power to heal, or who deserves healing and how we can increase our chances. Thanks to the revelation of our personal faith, we know and have experienced Jesus' healing. And thanks to 16th century Catholic priest and scholar, John Calvin, we're clear about two things: *nobody* deserves it, and it's offered to everybody, without regard to any human categories. Salvation, healing, the blessing of God, can only be gift, God's gift to humanity through Christ Jesus, a gift of God's grace which can neither be managed by the church nor merited by an individual.

So we Presbyterians pretty much don't worry about salvation and whatnot. Because we already know that the power of Jesus' healing is available to even the grossest scumbags around. (Not that Presbyterians are the grossest scumbags around – Calvin insists that all people are equally scumbags.)

But when we scumbags covered in the shrouds of our misery stand at a distance, and cry "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" we know that Jesus *does* have mercy on us. He doesn't peer more closely to distinguish whose faith is strongest, or whose repentance is most sincere, or which of us most deserves his grace. He doesn't say, "Come here a little closer so I can see what race you are, or what gender, or what creed you profess, what sexuality I gave you."

No, simply on the strength of our appeal for it, Jesus freely and indiscriminately offers his amazing grace ... to everyone. So, counting on that, we Presbyterians really don't give it just a while lot more thought. We are not an anxious people overly concerned with our personal status before the Almighty. The focus of *our* story, like Luke's, is not so

much on how to achieve salvation – that’s already been taken care of. You know. Two thousand years of yesterdays ago. Like Luke’s, the focus of *our* story is on how we *respond* to the unmerited gift of God’s grace. The question for Presbyterians is not, “oh gee, I’ve messed up. What do I do now?” It’s “oh gee, I’ve been loved, forgiven, and healed by God. What do I do now?”

And the answer today’s story affirms is to feel, express, and live out of, gratitude. Unfortunately, only one in Luke’s story apparently feels, expresses, and lives out of gratitude for his healing. “What became of the other nine?” asks a puzzled Jesus.

What *did* become of the other nine, equally blessed, equally healed, equally restored lepers?

Recently I came across a quote that for me struck to the heart of today’s story. “My religious is gratitude,” is the quote, and, as you see, I used it to entitle today’s sermon. Unfortunately, as is becoming increasingly the case with my middle-aged memory, I couldn’t recall *where* I had seen the quote. Was it from my favorite magazine, The Sun? Or the AARP magazine, or Popular Science, the other periodicals I often read? Was it in the excellent Emory alumni magazine or a novel I’d recently read? I checked around but couldn’t find it. Determined to find out what sort of person would say “my religion is gratitude,” and, for that matter, what sort of life they led, I Googled the phrase.

Surprisingly what came up was a movie called *Guerrilla Midwife*, a recent documentary about an American woman named Robin Lim, who lives in the small village of Nyuh Kuning in Bali. It was in the documentary that Lim stated in passing that her religion was gratitude.

Originally a teacher and author of two books on childbirth, Lim arrived in Bali some fifteen years ago. At the time, a local doctor showed her the results of a UNICEF study that showed that the leading cause of death for women in Bali was hemorrhaging after childbirth.

Now this hit home for me, as I imagine it might for a number of us, not only because of Elise's harrowing experience of blood loss following the birth of her twins, but the sad, sad story of Martha Mwaniki, mother of Ben and Lucy, wife of Joseph Wanjao, who, at the birth of her third child in Kenya, slowly bled to death before she could be moved to adequate support. Every time I think about Martha's unnecessary death, I feel angry. Even though I have little doubt that peaceful, faithful Martha, graduate of Candler School of Theology, chaplain at Emory Hospital, and one of ours here at Emory Church, is thoroughly at home in the heart of God.

In any case, I couldn't help but feel a special appreciation for the work of this woman whose religion is gratitude, when I read that Ms. Lim, upon the encouragement of the local doctor, began to attend home births and hold post-natal clinics at her house. After losing her best friend, her sister and one of the midwives who delivered her children, all in the space of a year, Lim determined to dedicate herself to a life of service. She returned to the U.S. to obtain her professional certification, went back to Bali, and, together with local Hindu and Muslim midwives, established a nonprofit birth services facility.

Immediately after the 2004 tsunami hit Bali, she and other medical workers set up a relief clinic, which is still in operation, in which she and others trained surviving birth attendants in disaster delivery procedures. Lim is currently writing a book on

coping with disaster.

It was Lim's daughter, Deja, a filmmaker, who spent six years completing the documentary, *Guerilla Midwife*, about the work of her mother and other midwives around the world, a movie described as a "culturally mesmerizing, heart-wrenching documentary that reveals the need for reinventing protocols for pregnancy and childbirth in order to preserve our planet's humanity."¹

A synopsis of the movie reads: "In every country on this planet, there is a WAR being fought to gain an asset more precious than gold or oil. The battlefield is a woman's body when she is most vulnerable and in need of protection - when she is giving BIRTH. In this war we stand to lose our humanity. At this pivotal moment of life individuals develop either an intact or impaired capacity to love. Protecting our capacity to love is essential to saving our planet. The inappropriate use of technology during birth has disempowered women, harmed the bonding process between mother and child, and has sabotaged breast-feeding and our essential human right to peace. At the heart of this war, perpetuated by the agendas of big business and by our misunderstanding of the physiology of birth, we find the guardian of natural childbirth, the midwife."²

A movie about midwives? Martha Mwaniki? The battlefield of women's bodies? What has any of this to do with reformed theology and gospel healing? I hope you see that it has *everything* to do with it. For who is more likely find herself prostrate at Jesus'

1

http://rome.bside.com/2009/films/guerrillamidwife_rome2009.jsessionid=25657F7C21596699AB6AD031833640A0

² www.skwattacamp.com

feet than one whose religion is gratitude, and whose life, self-described as “healing the earth, one baby at a time,” has grown out of that gratitude? Like Luke, like Presbyterians, like Reformed theology, the focus of Lim’s story is not what she needs to do in order to achieve salvation, but how she can structure her life in response to the extraordinary, unmerited gift of God’s grace. Whatever became of the other nine lepers, we can be sure that Lim was not among them. And I like to think that neither would be any of us. For if there’s anything that’s meant to distinguish what Presbyterians believe, it’s that “our religion is gratitude.”

To the glory of God. Amen.