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First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest
July 25, 2021, “The Prayer of the Leper”

Our scripture today is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 17 verses 11-19, as we continue in our Sermon Series on Prayers of the Bible. Here we join Jesus on the road.

“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.’

When we read about these lepers, we need to understand the life of a leper. There is a whole chapter in Leviticus that details the treatment of someone with a skin disease. Any type of skin lesion would be under suspicion. Anyone with a skin lesion was to show himself or herself to the priest – there was no doctor involved. If it did not look too bad, the person had to quarantine for 7 days and then go back to the priest to have it checked again. If it still wasn’t healed, but did not show signs of leprosy, they had to quarantine for another 7 days. This could continue for quite a while – every seven days until the priest deemed it healed at which point the priest would proclaim you clean, and after a ritual cleaning and sacrifice, you could go back to your life and family.

If it became worse and you had leprosy you were to live outside the city, wear rags, mess up your hair, and cover your face with a cloth, so that everyone knew you were a leper – the unclean. A leper was forbidden to get within four cubits of another person. A cubit is approximately 18 inches, so four cubits is about six feet.... If anyone came near you, you were to shout loudly “unclean, unclean” so that everyone would know to stay away. There was such fear of leprosy that it was believed that even to cross the shadow of a leper one might become unclean.

Do you notice that the Biblical laws on leprosy sound strangely similar to what we have been experiencing these past 18 months? Isolation and quarantine, face coverings, six feet of social distancing, and warnings that one might be sick. Many of those who tested positive for COVID-19 felt like lepers, so much so that many were ashamed to let others know. They felt pushed to the margins. Judged just as the lepers in ancient times. Not all survived the pandemic, over 600,000 souls in this country have perished. People are still hungry and a housing crisis is upon many. The isolation has traumatized us all. But, we still have prayers of thanks to offer to God, praise to make us well.

It is amazing how little things seem to change...

Traveling through this liminal space, between Samaria and Galilee, Jesus encounters these lost and forgotten men. These 10 lepers approach Jesus and ask for healing. All ten leave, but one turns around, and falls at the feet of Jesus and gives thanks. And this one is a Samaritan – one who is doubly cursed because he was an enemy of the Jews, opens their eyes. Jesus says his faith has made him well. He has already been healed of his leprosy, his being made well is translated as being saved, being made whole with God. Again, how little seems to have changed? Those who have experienced pain and separation, and exclusion are the ones who open our eyes.

I have preached a few times about healing during the pandemic, it seemed that many of the healing scriptures came my way. This is not so much a healing story – yes, the 10 lepers were healed, but a story about the response to the gift of being healed. Knowing what we have just learned about the hideous life of a leper, it seems unbelievable that only this one returned to give thanks. We do not find a written prayer from the tenth leper in these words, it is a reminder of thankful pray and how it saves us. Like the plethora of gratitude journals out now, it is a call to find and name that for which we are thankful.

It is easy to point a finger at the nine lepers who kept going, but they seem to be used here as the backdrop for this one. The focus is on the one who returned and gave thanks. Maybe we focus on the wrongs we feel the nine have done, because we fear someone will notice that we might just be one of those nine.

Martin Luther is said to have defined worship as “the tenth leper turning back.” In our confession each week, we thank God. Often saying, “Thanks be to God!” There is an exclamation point at the end of that, but do we offer an enthusiastic, Thanks be to God, or has even this thanks become rote? Do we answer God with a worthy level of praise for all that God has forgiven us?

Not only thanking God, but those we love, and even the stranger. Gratitude should be our first thought, not an afterthought. I was touched yesterday in the memorial service for Cathy Tucker. One of her son’s said it was important for him to thank her that last time he spoke with her. This reminds me that we need to not only ask the people we love for forgiveness, but also thank them. Not being able to thank my father one last time for all he had done and been for me is a regret I carry.

Today we have so many places where we can be thankful to God. In the baptisms of Carter and Lily, we are thankful for their parent’s commitment to bring them up in the Christian faith. We thank the congregation for covenanting to help raise Carter and Lily in the faith. We are thankful for the opportunity that our young people have once again travel on Work Trip to serve. For the bells ringing.

In our everyday lives, we look to the places where we can offer thanks to God. For the sunrise in the morning, children laughing, in having a full refrigerator and a home to live in, a job, people to love and whom love us. To offer thanks for a community in which we are reminded, even outside of these walls, that there is work to do for the kingdom, and our gratitude for the call.

I attended a wedding last night, and found that I was not the only teary-eyed person as the bride walked in. It was unusual that those attending were clapping and hooting and

hollering as each member of the wedding party walked in. Usually that happens at the end, and only for the bride and groom. But last night, as the parents and the wedding party processed, people rejoiced. With this scripture in my head for today, I wished we would respond in the same manner in worship. That we would sometimes be as enthusiastic, clapping and cheering in our thanks and praise to God, as we were last night to have an opportunity to finally be celebrating a wedding together.

Our being made whole often happens not because we set out to be healed, but through responding faithfully to the commands of God. This chapter in Luke begins with Jesus teaching about discipleship. Healing takes place as we respond to God's call on our lives to be disciples. This response is in gratitude to all that God has given us.

Maybe, just maybe this should become a prayer we say, even when we are not aware that we should, because God is always healing us and leading us out of isolation, or fear. Because we sometimes don't see it right away, we should error on the side of offering thanks and praise often, even when we don't yet know what it is for. Anne Lamott says the two best prayers to say are, "help me, help me, help me," and "thank you, thank you, thank you".... May this be one of our daily prayers.

I would like to close with a prayer of praise from Ted Loder.

Wondrous worker of wonders,
I praise you, not alone for what has been,
or what is,
but for what is yet to be,
for you are gracious beyond all telling of it.

I praise you,
that out of the turbulence of my life
a kingdom is coming,
is being shaped even now
out of my slivers of loving,
my bits of trusting,
my springs of hoping,
my tootles of laughing,
my drips of crying,
my smidgens of worshipping;

that out of my songs and struggles,
out of my griefs and triumphs,
I am gathered up and saved,
for you are gracious beyond all telling of it.

I praise you,
that you turn me loose
to go with you to the edge of now and maybe,
to welcome the new,
to see my possibilities,
to accept my limits,
and yet begin living to the limit
of passion and compassion
until, released by joy,
I uncurl to other people
and to your kingdom coming,
for you are gracious beyond all telling of it. Amen