


“Nature of Faith”

Sunday, October 9, 2016

20th Sunday after Pentecost

 **(Luke 17:11-19, CEB)**

Jesus heals a Samaritan

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.

As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices and said,

“Jesus, Master, show us mercy!”

When Jesus saw them, he said, *“Go, show yourselves to the priests.”*

As they left, they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice.

He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan.

Jesus replied, “*Weren’t ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?*”

Then Jesus said to him, “*Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.*”

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

[2nd Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

Last Sunday we talked about God’s **economy of faith** and how we have what we need as God takes whatever faith we can muster and uses it to get us through “*whatever*”.

We looked at the story of the tiny mustard seed to imagine how strong we really are when we rely on God for what we need.

No worries!

This morning Luke brings us another story about faith.

He tells us that the *nature of faith* manifests itself in the ways we offer God our praise and thanksgiving.

Maybe you're familiar with the term, "*Living with an Attitude of Gratitude*".

As cliché as that may seem, it is exactly what this story is about.

Let us pray...Lord, today we come to your word wanting to know more about what you expect from us as faithful people. Bring us to deeper understanding this morning. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Professor Kimberly Bracken Long suggests:

"***Your faith has made you well***' is one of those verses from Scripture that may have done as much harm as good. On the one hand, many have given joyful thanks to God after recovering from illness or an accident. Just as many do not recover, even though they may have prayed just as hard and just as often."

Is one's faith stronger than the other's?

It is not uncommon for people to wonder if their prayers are good enough.

Maybe they didn't pray loud enough, or long enough, or in the right language.

I don't think the problem is with our prayers; I think it has more to do with understanding the **nature of our faith**.

Maybe we've been taught to think of our faith in terms of cause and effect.

We imagine that if we believe this or that, good things will come our way.

If we follow the rules we will avoid bad things in our life.

We may think that being a Christian is like getting a flu shot, immunizing us against evil.

What bothers me about this line of thinking is that it may well be the cause of many believers walking away from the church and turning their backs on God.

This misunderstanding of faith closes conversations with God just when those conversations are needed the most.

There is good news in the story that helps us avoid those pitfalls.

One thing we notice is that the actual healing of the ten lepers isn't narrated in the story.

It takes place "*off-stage*"...It is kind of a sidebar.

The emphasis in the story is on the fact that the Samaritan – *the unlikely outsider* – returned to offer **praise** and **thanksgiving**.

We don't know what happened to the other nine.

We presume they were healed of their leprosy.

We think they must have gone to the priest to be declared clean again.

That's what the story tells us.

We're not even sure of how Jesus feels about them.

What is his tone? Is he sad, angry, disappointed, or simply amazed at their bad manners?

We can't really tell

What we **do** know for sure is that **one man** returned to say thank you and Jesus offered **him** a wellness far deeper than physical healing.

This outcast leper, this despised Samaritan was embraced by the grace of God and made whole.

This man shows us what it looks like to live with an ***attitude of gratitude*** – we experience the wholeness of spirit that God intends for us.

Similar to last week's mustard seed story, Jesus tells us that we don't need to be concerned with whether we have enough faith to make our prayers "*work*".

Faith isn't about cause and effect;

"say it and get it."

What Jesus is talking about here is that the nature of faith is to live what we believe and to live what we believe is to constantly give thanks and praise to God.

Our faith is in the God who created us and gives us all that we need.

Our faith is in the God who came to live with us, suffer for us, and die in our place to defeat sin and death.

Our faith is in the God who lives with us *still* as comforter, advocate, and friend.

For **this God** we must be truly **grateful**.

Living a life of gratitude constitutes living a life of faith.

Think of it as if “*faith*” and “*gratitude*” are interchangeable words.

To practice gratitude **is** to practice faith.

If our faith is **not** something we **possess**, but rather something we **DO** as a *way of life*, then our life expresses complete **trust** in God.

When we **know** that God, the giver of all good things, holds all life in his grace-filled hands – how can we **NOT** *practice gratitude*?

Living this kind of faith, living with praise and thanksgiving, we realize that faith is given to us

in abundance, “*pressed down and overflowing*”
(Luke 6).

Remember that this section of Luke’s gospel began with Jesus telling his followers that the demands of coming along with him are great.

It is clear that spreading the Good News is going to be a challenge; there will be mountains to move along the way.

Sometimes we don’t think we have what it takes – our faith is too small; our prayers aren’t good enough.

So Jesus reassures us by teaching that living out our faith – by **respecting** God’s ways, by **honoring** one another, and by **giving** thanks in **all** circumstances – we are given all the faith we require.

This is where we discover the true nature of our faith.

If you are healthy, happy, and secure, you can give thanks to God for your blessings.

If you have been healed, thank God for the healing.

If you have reconciled a relationship, give thanks to God for the reconciliation.

So also, if you are fighting against illness, thank God for walking with you through the pain.

If you are battling an addiction, thank God for giving you strength to get through today.

If you are mired in grief, thank God for peace and comfort; thank God for sharing that person with you.

If prayers of thanks are part of the soul's healing and restoration, the *physical* circumstances of the person praying become less important.

It is the **thanking** that saves the grateful leper and heals his soul.

This thankfulness is available to **all** of us in **all** circumstances.

One person may give thanks to God for today's wonderful experience.

Another may give thanks to God for holding her up during a difficult day.

When we practice gratitude it changes our life.

Imagine waking up every morning and being grateful – for the day; for waking up at all.

Think of giving thanks for the opportunity to earn a living, provide for your family, and enjoy the company of those you love.

Everything you have is a chance to give thanks.

It is a lifestyle *choice* to give thanks to God – **NO MATTER WHAT.**

Gratitude also changes the life of a congregation.

Grateful Christians come to worship, not because the “*get something out of it*”, but to give thanks and praise to God within the faith community.

The quality of worship is transformed by the gratitude of the congregation.

Stewardship becomes less about fund raising and more about the joyful giving by faithful givers.

The mission of the church changes from ethical duty to the work of grateful hearts and hands extending Jesus’ love to the world.

Prayer includes not only intercessions and requests, but also shouts of praise and thanksgiving.

Some people believe that the practice of gratitude is an essential part of being human.

John Burkhart wrote: *“To withhold acknowledgement, to avoid celebration, to stifle gratitude, may prove as unnatural as holding one’s breath.”*

Worship is at the heart of the Christian life and this story of a man who returns to give thanks points to that truth.

More than once in Scripture we are told to *“return and praise God”*.

From the shepherds at Jesus’ birth to the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, we are told to return and give God praise and thanksgiving.

God promised to be at work in the world, in our church, and in our lives, so we cannot help but give thanks – that is the nature of our faith.

“Go on your way, your faith has made you well,” is not problematic at all – even when physical healing does not come.

Instead, Jesus’ words describe a life of blessing for the church: as we go on our way, we rejoice and give thanks for, *in giving thanks in all things*, we find that God, indeed, is present in all things.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

[Giving thanks to Kimberly Bracken Long and ***“Feasting on the Word”***]