

Wesley United Methodist Church

October 9, 2016

Text: 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

Title: Give me Open Hands and Open Doors – Keep on Healing All

Karl Barth, a great theologian, was fond of saying that the basic human response to God is gratitude – not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving.<sup>i</sup>

We see this in today's gospel, when 10 lepers call out to Jesus, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Leprosy in Jesus' time was a sort of catch all term for many different skin diseases all of which were considered highly contagious. When a person was diagnosed or suspected to have leprosy, he or she was immediately separated from his or her family and from life in general. A leper was required to stay about 50 feet away from any other person and to call out "UnClean" when approaching an area where people were present. It appears in this incident that 10 lepers had created a sort of community for themselves since they couldn't be near anyone else. Their greatest desire, however, was to be cleansed, to be cured and to be able to once again live with their families and friends.

They call out to Jesus asking for mercy for help and he tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. Only a priest could declare a person clean again, cured of the disease, and able to finally reenter society. Jesus could heal them; Jesus could cure them; but Jesus could not give them permission to once again be with their families – only a priest could verify that the disease was gone.

They went on their way and as they went they were made clean. A little aside here, it always strikes me that a response seems to be required from them. I wonder what would have happened if they had just stood

there and continued to ask Jesus to heal them, or if they had waited for the healing. Luke tells us, that “as they went, they were made clean.” It is a reminder to me, that when we pray, we also need to be prepared to act in response to our prayers and to Jesus’ word to us.

As they went to see the priest, they were made clean. When one of them saw that he was healed, he turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. What of the other nine? Maybe they were so excited that they began running to the priest, filled with joy and eager to be declared clean so that they could soon hug their spouses and children and once again work to provide food for their families.

One of the 10 actually didn’t need to go to the priest – because he was not a Jew; he was a Samaritan. While he had been part of that community born out of the common suffering of leprosy and isolation, once clean he would still be an outcast as far as the Jewish community was concerned. He was a Samaritan, an outcast, somehow less than fully human. Yet, he is the one who turned around and went rushing back to Jesus, praising God and throwing himself at Jesus’ feet.

Jesus’ response perhaps to him, but more likely to those with him, was to ask where the other nine were. Did none of the others return to give thanks to God? Then Jesus speaking to the man said, “Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well.”

This is where it gets a little more confusing. The other nine do not lose their healing. Presumably they are doing exactly what they were told to do; they are going to the priest in order to be declared cured so that they can go back to their families and their lives.

There are three terms used in this story to describe what happened to the ten lepers. They are cured or healed meaning that their disease is gone. They are made clean – readmitted to society, no longer an outcast – a pronouncement made by the priest. Finally, the one who returned is declared “made well” or “saved” or “delivered” depending upon the translation we read. This is a deeper component than just the physical healing of the leprosy. This is a deliverance not just from the disease or stigma but also from the spiritual and psychological damage that had been inflicted because of the disease.

We probably all know people who have survived a serious heart attack or a life threatening illness or surgery who while they would be considered cured and may physically be fully well, still carry deep scars and damage on a spiritual and psychological level. They may live in fear that someday this will happen again, afraid to fully embrace life. Others embrace life completely and can be considered not only physically well but also (and maybe even more importantly) spiritually and psychologically well. What makes the difference? Why did Jesus tell this Samaritan, this outsider, that his faith had made him well?

When we gather to celebrate communion, we join in a prayer called “The Great Thanksgiving”. A part of that prayer says, “It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Almighty God.” It doesn’t say, it is good to give thanks when things are going well. It doesn’t say, it is good to give thanks when we get what we want. It says, “a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks” and we then go on to give praise to God.

Jesus offers to this grateful leper a wellness that goes beyond the physical and teaches us here about the nature of faith. “To have faith is to

live it, and to live it is to give thanks. It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith – this is the grateful sort of faith that has made this man truly and deeply well.”<sup>ii</sup>

It is also important that we notice that this man was a Samaritan and Jesus healed him. Jesus didn't say, "You are not a Jew, so I will cure the other nine but not you." Jesus never set up barriers to those who would come to him. Jesus didn't ask if they were worthy; Jesus simply loved and healed. Frequently in the Gospels we find that it is the least likely person who is healed, the person we think least deserving, the person who is the outcast. Jesus didn't set up barriers and neither should we. Jesus loved all and so should we. The Samaritan gave thanks to God and so should we.

Please note that there is a difference between giving thanks to God in all circumstances and giving thanks to God for all circumstances. I can't imagine that any of us would be giving thanks to God for a car accident or a health scare or the death of a loved one. But I can imagine that in each of these circumstances we can still give thanks to God that we are not alone, that there are others who walk with us, that God gives us the strength one step at a time to face whatever is before us. We can give thanks that out of things that we would prefer to avoid, can come opportunities or other situations that can be used for good.

Practicing gratitude intentionally changes our lives as individuals. We will find ourselves feeling more optimistic and hopeful. We will find ourselves looking for things to be grateful for rather than looking for things to complain about. It also changes the character of a congregation. Let me give you just one example: We can be grateful to God that our Blessing of the Animals last week reached several families with the love of

God including a few who did not have a previous connection with our congregation – or we can complain that the sky was overcast, that there was a threat of rain, and that we only had 13 dogs present rather than 40 or 50 and a hundred or more people. We can then say, “thank you God” and plan to do this again or we can look at it with a negative attitude and complain about what didn’t happen. Wouldn’t you rather live your life giving thanks to God rather than poisoning your life with negative thoughts and complaints all the time? Which do you think would make you truly well?

When we give thanks and praise to God then we also realize that we have each been given gifts for ministry that we are called to use. Jesus healed all of the lepers and we are also called to heal all. For some of us that may be through careers in the medical field but for the vast number of us it will be in ways we may not even recognize.

When I was being appointed to the first church I was to serve, a dear friend of mine called me and said, “I keep getting the message that your ministry will be a ministry of healing. You’re not into that stuff are you?” She was thinking about healing services, laying on of hands, calling upon God to bring physical healing to someone, things that she didn’t imagine me doing.

What we discovered was that while healing was needed in that church it wasn’t physical healing, it was spiritual healing and that took place through things that we can all do, really listening to someone when they are speaking, creating a safe space for someone to share their hopes, dreams, disappointments, hurts and fears. Healing takes place when we treat each other with respect and honor the image of God in each person. Healing may take place when we provide food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, clothing for those in need, companionship for the lonely, prayer

for those who need to be held gently in prayer. There are so many ways that each of us can be involved in healing ministries and there are so many ways that our communities and our world need real healing, need to be really made well. Our faith, our daily expressions of gratitude to God, our ways of living faithfully can be ways in which real healing and transformation can take place.

Many of you probably received a letter this week about the upcoming stewardship work of the church and I would imagine that most of you think of dollar signs when you hear the word stewardship. Stewardship is much more than finances. When as Christians we practice gratitude, then we come to worship not just to “get something out of it” but to give thanks and praise to God. Stewardship then is transformed from fundraising to the glad gratitude of joyful givers. The mission of the church changes from ethical duty to the work of grateful hands and hearts. Prayer includes not only our intercessions (or prayers for others) and supplications (prayers for ourselves) but also our thanksgiving for all of life.

God promises to be at work in the world, in our church, and in our lives so we cannot help but give thanks as we partner with God in this great healing and transforming ministry.

Certainly there is money involved in the ministry of the church and we can all be grateful to our finance committee members who work so hard to be faithful stewards – faithful caretakers of the financial resources that we provide. But the money is a tool just like our time, our faithful use of our abilities and together they help us to be in faithful and fruitful ministry. It is helpful to think about the ministry of the church in terms of what we are doing, ministries of compassion, connection, inspiration, and transformation. These are ministries that involve all of us in different ways

each giving thanks to God and using the gifts that God has given us so that we truly can be a church of Open Hearts, Open Hands and Open Doors, a church that brings healing to all of God's creation in many different ways.

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<sup>i</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/3* (quoted in *Feasting on the Word* homiletical perspective on Luke 17:11-19, p.165

<sup>ii</sup> *Feasting on the Word* p.166