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“Grace and Gratitude”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Luke 17:12-19

Leprosy is an awful disease. It causes peeling skin, sores, nerve and limb damage, and at its worst, blindness and paralysis. In Jesus’ day, there was no cure. People who had leprosy were thrown out of their communities and forced to gather together outside the central village areas. Not able to work and shunned by their own families and friends, they begged for food and money along the roadsides. Travelers going from one city to the next would pass by the colonies of outcasts, steering clear of them as they cried out, “Unclean! Unclean!”

Luke tells us that Jesus was on the road between Galilee and Samaria, on his way to Jerusalem, when he was approached by a group of ten lepers (nine Jews and a Samaritan, bound together by their disease). They called out to him, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” They obviously knew who he was and had heard of his reputation for miracles and healings. He looked at them and knew immediately their pain and their suffering and had compassion on them.

Jesus doesn’t do anything especially “miracle-worthy” in this story. He doesn’t put mud on their wounds, or send them to wash in healing waters. Instead, he tells them to go and show themselves to the priest. That was it. But these words alone were words of hope, for a priest was the one who could declare that they were officially cured of their horrid disease. For these lepers, these instructions were full of hope and possibility. So away they go, and as they go, their bodies begin to be restored. Fingers and toes regenerate. Tissues become pink and smooth again.

Where there has been disease and deterioration, there is now health and healing. No doubt great rejoicing took place among them all.

Here, however, the story takes a significant turn. Out of the ten who have been healed, nine of them head obediently with their newly healed bodies to see the priest. After all, this is what Jesus told them to do, and this is the next step they must take in order to be recognized as clean. I dare say I would have done the same. After all, they were but one priestly visit away from going home.

But then there is the Samaritan. The gospel-writer carefully inserts this fact into the story, and it adds a wicked twist. You see, the people of Samaria were not friendly with the Jews. They were known to be the *least* likely to do the right thing according to Jewish laws and customs. This Samaritan is the last one anyone would expect to be faithful. As a non-Jew, he didn't require a priest to certify his healing. As a foreigner, he didn't have a home in Jerusalem to run to. He was an outsider.

It is not difficult to imagine who might relate to this Samaritan in today's world—the Syrian refugee, the Mexican immigrant, the Muslim woman in the headscarf, the one who knows HB2 is against him, the mother who fears letting her dark-skinned son go out at night, the homeless person begging at the intersection, the father who cannot get healthcare for his child, the mentally ill youth who struggles daily with depression—those who feel left out, excluded, unimportant, forgotten. Those who relate best to the Samaritan are the ones who understand what happens next in this story and why.

As soon as the healed Samaritan begins to comprehend the magnitude of what has happened, he, in his exuberant, unrestrained joy, returns to Jesus, the source of his miraculous transformation, and throws himself at Jesus' feet in a spontaneous, unbelievably grateful act of praise. He may not have had a home, but he did have Jesus—the one who had treated him the same as he had treated all the others, who had given him grace in the same measure as he had given it to all the others, who had healed him, as fully and completely as he had healed all the others.

He responds to Jesus with a bursting heart, full of gratitude and love. This Samaritan is the one who expected Jesus' healing power the least. And so when he *is* healed, he runs back and throws himself before the one who has given him new life, who has made him whole in more ways than he ever could have imagined.

Where were the others? That's what Jesus wants to know. But they don't show up. Perhaps they thought they were entitled to such a healing, since they were Jews, after all, Jesus' people. Perhaps they had been so filled with self-pity that they believed they *deserved* to be healed. We don't know. But they didn't return to Jesus and in this story, the ultimate outsider is the only one who recognizes what has really taken place, recognizes that in Jesus, God not only restored his life and gave him a new identity, but in Jesus, God was "bringing order out of chaos,"¹ transforming lives by grace, and changing the way of the world.

In returning, the healed Samaritan received an even greater gift. "Get up and go on your way," Jesus tells him. "Your faith has made you well." In the Greek, this means, your faith has *saved* you. In recognizing the Holy One before him and in responding with exuberant gratitude upon such recognition, the one former leper bonded himself to Jesus in a way the other nine never did. The other nine recognized the healing. They did not recognize the gift as grace.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story of her church in Georgia some years back. The church decided to leave the sanctuary open during the week for those who wanted to find an oasis in the middle of the city, for those who wanted to pray, or just to pause in the midst of their busy lives to reflect, to listen. We have talked about doing the same thing. Because the city is full of all kinds of people, some with good intentions, some without, the church had installed a closed circuit television camera "to keep an eye on the place, to make sure no one [ran] off with the candlesticks or [did] anything unseemly in the pews, like drink, or sleep, or embrace. You have got to be sensible about these things," said Taylor.²

During one week, the receptionist noticed quite a bit of action on her television monitor. She reported to the staff that a man had been lying face

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² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), p.110.

down on the altar steps for hours. Every now and then he would raise his arms toward the altar and lie down again. They staff decided that the parish superintendent should enter the sanctuary and “check on” the situation.

Soon he returned to the office. “He says he’s praying,” he explained.

“Aha,” [the staff] said, thanking him for this information.

Taylor unfolds for us the rest of the story this way:

It went on for days [she said]. Every morning around eleven the receptionist would look up from her desk and there he would be, prostrate before the altar, his hair in knots, his worn clothes covered with dustballs from the floor. The sexton cleaned around him, the [chancel] guild tried not to disturb him when they came to polish the silver; the florist asked if he should leave the flowers somewhere else but we said no, just step over the man and put them . . . where they belong.

Finally it was Sunday, and my turn [writes Taylor] to celebrate communion at the early service. He was there when I arrived, blocking my path . . . , and I did not know what to do. Maybe he was drunk, surely he was crazy—what would happen if I asked him to move? Approaching him as if I were approaching a land mine, I tapped him on the shoulder. He was so skinny, so dirty. “Excuse me,” I said, “but there’s going to be a service here in a few minutes. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to move.”

He lifted his forehead from the floor and spoke with a heavy Haitian accent. “That’s okay,” he said, rising and dusting himself off in one dignified motion. Then he left, and he never came back. The eight o’clock service began on time. The faithful took their places and I took mine. We read our parts well. We spoke when we were supposed to speak and were silent when we were supposed to be silent. We offered up our symbolic gifts, we performed our bounden duty and service, and there was nothing wrong with what we did, nothing at all. We were good servants, careful and contrite sinners who had come for our ritual cleansing, but one of us was missing.

The foreigner was no longer among us; he had risen and gone his way, but the place where he lay on his face for hours—making a perfect spectacle of himself—seemed all at once so full of heat and light that I stepped around it on my way out, chastened if only for that moment by the call to a love so excessive, so disturbing, so beyond the call to obedience that it made me want to leave all my good works behind.³

I think this story of the ten lepers shows us the difference between obedience and love—and nine out of ten of us are better at obedience. Give us a list of things that the faithful should do, and we will make sure that we do each thing on the list. Read our Bible. Check. Pray our prayers. Check. Come to worship. Check. Give generously to the mission of the church. Check. Be kind to strangers. Volunteer to help the poor. Love our neighbor. Seek justice for all. Visit the sick. Check. Check. Check. Check. We got this. We know how to do this. We are the nine. We know what Jesus has done for us and surely he knows we love him. And surely we do. But that's no reason to go overboard. That's no reason to lose our heads.

So what about that healed Samaritan? He's the one who really loves Jesus, isn't he? He's the one who recognized Jesus for who he was. He's the one who was transformed by such grace in such a way that he was overcome with gratitude.

May we all be so transformed by God's grace. May we all display such lavish and excessive gratitude to the one we call Lord.

In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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³ Taylor, pp. 110-111