

November 14, 2010
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Luke 17:11-19

Faith and Thanksgiving

We are working on developing that ‘attitude of gratitude’. Why? – I am glad you asked. You see by cultivating that attitude of gratitude - slowing down and paying attention to what God is doing in the midst of our own lives – in the midst of our communities – in the midst of our nation – in the midst of the world all around us -

- We are reminded of all wonderful ways (large and small) in which God provides for us.
- Our anxiousness and uncertainty about today and tomorrow is dispelled.
- Our fears are calmed.
- We become people who move from cynicism and despair -- to hope.
- We become people who find that the constant gnawing inside of us – that driven scarcity – that we will have enough – enough time, enough talent, enough money, enough love, enough... is replaced by the calmness of sufficiency.

My question to us today is what are you thankful for?

I want you to take a few minutes and write on your Connection Card some of the things that you are thankful for.

Does anybody want to share one or two things that you are thankful for?

Our scripture reading this morning is a story about giving thanks. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, Luke tells us. He is traveling north to south – from the Galilee (up here) – to Jerusalem down here. Luke tells us that as he is on his way to Jerusalem he is going through a region between Samaria and Galilee.

This might be for us like traveling from county to county. Maybe if we were on our way to Dubuque it would be like saying that we found ourselves somewhere between Linn County and Jones County. But Jesus is in this in between place.

It is often interesting to try to tell people where we (Echo Hill Presbyterian Church) are isn't it. We start by saying that we are in Cedar Rapids but that's not right is it? Then we say that that we are in Marion but that is not technically right either. And we can't say that we are in Robins. But we are between Marion and Robins and just north of Cedar Rapids.

Anyway Jesus is in the in-between place – a place I think that you would be likely to find lepers.

Now leprosy is a general term used in both the Old and New Testaments that refer most probably not to a specific disease but to refer to a wide range of diseases that affected the skin and possibly hair of a person. It could refer to something like a psoriasis – where you have those red dry and itchy patches of skin - but it could also refer to having open sores – like boils – that would spread over the body - or even a condition like necrosis - where skin and bone actually deteriorate (rot away) over time.

It is not only the disease that is associated with the label 'leper' but it is that the disease is associated with sinful behavior. In the book of Deuteronomy Moses calls Israel (God's people) to obey God – to observe God's commandments. If they don't he tells them, among other things, that the Lord will afflict them with "*the boils of Egypt, with ulcers of the skin, scurvy and itch, of which you cannot be healed.*" (Duet 28:27)

So it is a combination of some kind of gross skin disease and its connection to sinful behavior – the possibility and fear that others have of catching something – or being contaminated by another's sin - that causes 'lepers' to be sent away from 'normal' communities – to be labeled as social and religious outcast. Which is why Jesus encounters these 10 lepers together in this in between place.

Luke, in relaying this story of thanksgiving to us, wants to make sure that we not only know that we are talking about outcast – but we are also talking about an outcast among outcast. There is a Samaritan in the crowd. And in Jewish culture Samaritan were regarded as second class citizens – they were people to be avoided and ignored. They were the woman you pass by on the sidewalk with the shopping cart filled with her belongings. The man you avoid because his arms are waving as he talks to himself. The drunk passed out in the park.

While Luke through insinuation implies that 9 of the 10 are a part of the Jewish community – draws our attention to the Samaritan in the crowd. A Samaritan with leprosy would be an outcast among outcasts – you see. They would be far removed from the norms of the communal and religious life of Jews.

Which is the point that Luke wants to make and it is the point that Luke does make – because Luke wants us to be surprised by the response of this Samaritan leper upon realizing that he had been healed of his disease. Luke wants us to be surprised that this is the one that came to offer Jesus thanks.

But it is not the man's thankfulness that surprises me – instead it is what Jesus says to the man at the very end of their encounter. The part where Jesus says, "*Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*"

I am surprised because Luke has given no indication that there is any connect between this man and having some kind of faith. Where did this faith come from?

Did this man attend Sunday School – or Hebrew School?

Had he had some 'encounter' with a passing 'pilgrim'?

Had he somehow heard John the Baptist call to repent and believe?

Or was it possible that his fellow lepers 'schooled' him in the 'ways of God' while they were out begging for alms?

Not only where did this faith come from but what kind of faith was it?

Was it faith in the God of Abraham or Jesus of Nazareth?

Was it the kind of faith that believed in a book or in a set of religious tenants?

Was it the kind of faith that came through thorough testing?

Was is it the kind of faith that was concerned more in the future with the certainty of some sort of eternal salvation – or only concerned with the moment and faith in Jesus the healer?

Where did this faith come from and what kind of faith was it!

Theologian Shirley Guthrieⁱ in speaking about ‘faith’ reminds us that *faith is simply trust – it is trust – confidence in God.*

- *It is not believing in the Bible or some other book – but it is believing in the God we come to know through the book.*
- *It is not confidence in faith that saves – but the one who saves.*
- *It is a total commitment of ourselves to the living God whose trustworthiness has been proved by God’s powerful and loving action in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

Faith is our confidence in God.

- That in God ‘we live and move and have our being’ (Paul to the Athenians Acts 17:28)
- That in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit we are brought into relationship with the Triune God.
- That in our ‘living and our dying we belong to God’. (Paul to the Romans 14:8)
- That there is ‘nothing in all creation’ that can separated us from the love of God. (Rom 8:39)

Where does such faith come from?

Guthrie addresses this question by saying,

How can we have such faith? (This total commitment to God who we know in Jesus Christ.)

How can we be so sure of God's love that we are freed from the unnecessary, self-defeating attempt to justify (save ourselves)?

How can we trust God so completely that we do not have to trust our own goodness or faith?

Faith – trust – or assurance in God is a gift.

Paul says it this way as he writes to the church in Ephesus. *“We were dead – through sin – through giving ourselves to all the things in this world we thought would save us – but God who is rich in mercy – out of his great love – made us alive – by grace we have been saved.”*

By grace we have been saved through faith – and this saving and this faith – this is not of our own doing but it is a gift from God – not the result of our knowing enough – or knowing the right things – or because we worked hard enough. -- It just is.

The faith that trusts in the love of God, Guthrie writes, *“is itself the work of God's love ‘revealed, as John Calvin says, to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”*

I wonder if any of us this morning put on our cards that we were thankful for the gift of faith. If not maybe we could – we should add it to our list.

For it is the gift of faith – that makes us well. The gift of faith that calms our anxieties and calms our fears. – It is the gift of faith that fills us with hope about today and tomorrow. – It is the gift of faith that allows us to risk following Jesus in ways that allow us to be generous people.

ⁱ Guthrie, Shirley Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1994, pg. 323