

Response to Grace
A Sermon on Luke 17:11-19 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ October 9, 2022

We come together in worship, seeking to know and tell the truth. It is life-giving for us to seek out the truth and tell the truth about life. When we tell the truth we are able to build relationships of trust. Trust is the foundation for love.

Learning and speaking the truth requires us to pay more attention to people and to what they have actually experienced. We try to see the goodness in God's people and the true stories of God's people. That is why we have this set of rainbow doors outside of our church. We are affirming the true stories of God's people, in all their diversity.

Today's Gospel passage is a story about seeing the truth. We are trying to follow Jesus' example of paying attention to people and seeing the truth of their lives. Let's consider some of the details of the story.

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. The important thing here is that for the disciples and other Jewish people, this region was not their home turf. One thousand years before Jesus, in the time of King David, these lands were part of Israel. But hundreds of years before Jesus' time Samaria and Galilee had been conquered by other nations. Samaria and Galilee evoked feelings of bitterness, fear, and sadness. Most Jews avoided Samaritans and the foreigners who lived in Galilee. So Jesus and his disciples are going through a region that would be considered a dangerous neighborhood by their friends and family members.

As Jesus entered a village, there in the region bordering Samaria and Galilee, ten lepers approached him, but also keeping their distance. For thousands of years, people who were suffering from leprosy were isolated from everyone else in their communities. People suffering with leprosy were forced to live in isolated communities in some places until just a few decades ago.

Many people who are infected with leprosy don't show any of the symptoms, such as the skin being covered with lesions. But these men had the visible symptoms of leprosy, which is why they were forced to live on the edge of the town. Let's notice that these people are approaching Jesus, asking him for help, but they are also following the laws which require people suffering from leprosy to keep their distance in order to avoid infecting others.

The ten men called out to him, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Let's notice that in the Gospel of Luke the only people who call Jesus 'Master' are his disciples. So these people recognize Jesus is not just your average guy walking down the road. Let's also notice that Luke doesn't actually call them lepers; he says they were 'men who had leprosy'. They were probably asking Jesus to have mercy on them by giving them food or a few coins.

But Jesus did not give them food or coins. It is especially interesting that the text says, *Jesus saw the men.* Jesus saw through their sickness, through the sores and ugliness of the lesions and through their suffering. Jesus saw that there was much more potential goodness in their lives. Jesus saw there was something they needed much more than food. *and he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."* These directions would have had special meaning for these men suffering from leprosy. In their time and place the priests also had the role of serving as a sort of health commissioner. People who were cured of leprosy had to be inspected by a priest before they were allowed to re-enter the community.

And it happened that as the ten were going, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. This one man saw the reality of his situation, and he was overwhelmed with gratitude. *He knelt down on the ground at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a foreigner, a Samaritan.* This man was the most outside of the outsiders. He was covered with sores and he was a foreigner. This man did not come to Jesus seeking to be healed. He came asking for some food or some coins. He was healed of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and get on with your life, your faith has made you whole." The man was healed of his leprosy. But he was made whole in a way that points to spiritual healing. He received much more than he expected.

This story complements the parable we heard last week. Last week Jesus told the parable of the master and servant. The parable ends with these two verses: *Do you thank the servant for doing what was commanded?*

So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty." These two stories get at the same idea from opposite directions.

God's gifts to us are much greater than anything we could expect or hope for. This is true for each of us, no matter our situation. God has given us tremendous gifts. In response, Jesus' disciples adopt a posture of gratitude. In those situations where Jesus' disciples do the right thing, our response is not entitlement but to understand that we have given to others from the gifts God has given us.

How will we respond to God's grace in our lives? In my opinion I have the best job in the world because, as priest at St. Paul's, I see so many examples of people responding to the gifts they have been given with gratitude and faithfulness.

This is also a good question for us to ask ourselves as a congregation. As a congregation, we are in the position of the man with leprosy who asked for food or money. Jesus did not give him food or money. Jesus gave him something he did not expect, which was physical healing and spiritual wholeness. In the same way, God has given us tremendous gifts as a congregation. What will we do with the gifts we have been given as a church?

A group of our members has been thinking about this question in one particular way for the past seven years. The Open Doors Task Force has been planning for new, better ways for us to preserve and use one of our greatest gifts, which is the gift of these beautiful, enormous buildings. Thanks to the efforts of the Open Doors Task Force we will soon have a new entrance into our building from the parking lot, new bathrooms, new roofs and windows for the parish house, three handicapped accessible entrances, and an elevator to provide full access to the second floor of the parish house.

The project is called Open Doors because we want the doors of St. Paul's to be open to all people, to more people, to more diverse community groups, much more of the time. God has given us a tremendous gift in the shape of this enormous building and we are trying to be faithful by finding more ways to use that gift.

During the past six months, your vestry has been working on one more very specific, new way to use the gift of our building. A task force of the vestry has been working with a team of leaders from *A Tiny Home for Good*. Together we have been working to create a proposed partnership between St. Paul's and *A Tiny Home for Good*.

Our goal is to provide dignified, stable housing for ten individuals who have experienced homelessness. Our goal is for these ten people to experience more of the goodness and community and love God intends for them. Our goal is to build homes for ten individuals, ten apartments, and a shared living space, including a resource center and community kitchen and dining area on the second floor of the parish house. Our goal is to welcome these individuals into a strong, supportive community, overseen by the staff of *A Tiny Home for Good*. Our goal is to do this in a way that does not place an unnecessary risk or financial burden on either St. Paul's or *A Tiny Home for Good*.

If we accomplish these goals, like the servant in the parable, we will respond by saying, "We have only done what we ought to have done." If we accomplish these goals, like the man who suffered from leprosy, we at St. Paul's will respond with gratitude to the people and staff of *A Tiny Home for Good*, because this project is much more than we could have possibly expected to happen with our parish house just one year ago. If we accomplish these goals, we will be following the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

God's great desire is to be born into this world in new ways. God's great desire is for more love, more creativity, more goodness to be born in this place. It is our work to give birth to God's love in new ways in our time, the way Mary did.

God took on flesh and dwelt among us, in the person of Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus walked through the most challenging neighborhood and engaged directly with those who had been pushed to the edge. Christ Jesus looked at the ten men and saw tremendous potential for new life in them. Christ gave them a gift that was so much more than what they were looking for.

May it be the same way with us. May we be the people who see deep inside people's hearts, the way Jesus saw deep inside people's hearts. May we see the potential and the goodness of those who have been pushed to the edge of our community. May we respond to God's grace with gratitude. May our posture of gratitude be the sign of our faith. May we give birth to a new work of God's love in our time and place.