

Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

This month.....October.....is Stewardship season for us here at St. Paul's. During the week last week, all of you should have received a letter in the mail from our treasurer, Greg King and from me. The letter is an introduction to our stewardship campaign for this year which is taken from the book of Ephesians: "Walk in Love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us." During this month, we will be thinking about and praying about and making decisions about how we want to demonstrate our gratitude to God for all that we have been given.

When I took a look at the gospel reading for today, it just seemed tailor-made for introducing the whole concept of stewardship. There are 10 lepers who are cleansed and one who returns to say thank you. So, we could think about the 10 lepers as 10 dollars that go out into the world and the one that comes back to Jesus is the tithe. Well, we could say that, but that seems just a bit too trite and oversimplified, so we won't go there.

So let's take a look at this story about the 10 lepers and what their life must have been like. Just the mere thought of leprosy could strike terror into the heart of anyone around in Jesus' day. One of the worst things about leprosy was the damage that it did to nerve cells. Eventually, someone with leprosy couldn't feel anything in terms of physical sensation. It was highly contagious, so anyone infected with it was separated from the rest of the community. They had to go off and live by themselves in relative isolation.....no family, no friends, no home, no meaningful work, no socializing, no sense of belonging, no love, no future.....they were, in fact the living dead.

While it was.....and is.....an actual disease, we could also think about leprosy as a metaphor for sin. We live in a sinful world. We are immersed in sin. It is all around us and within us. Eventually, we can become numb to it as we tend to be less shocked by it and less disturbed by it. Sin cuts us off.....sometimes from our friends.....sometimes from our families....sometimes from ourselves. Sin can contaminate the meaningful work that we do, so that we feel less satisfaction or joy

in what we are doing. We may end up wondering what is it all for? Sin can cut us off from experiencing God's presence so close to us. Sin can keep us cut off from the life that God had intended for us.....the abundant life that was created for us.

Enter Jesus. The lepers keep a respectful distance.....just as we so often do. And they beg Jesus for mercy.....just as we so often do. They ask Jesus to heal them.....just as we so often do. Without fanfare and without requiring anything from them, Jesus simply tells them to go and show themselves to the priest because it is the priest who can pronounce them well and return them to the community and to their families. They do as they are told and somewhere along the way, they notice that their skin is completely cleared up. Their diseased skin has been replaced with fresh, new skin. They have been cleansed completely.....just as we are in the waters of baptism and in the absolution of sins. We can only imagine how these lepers felt. They must have been incredulous and filled with joy and relief. They have their health back. They have been restored, not just physically, but to their families and friends and their community.....to life itself.....just as we are!

There are 10 lepers whose lives are restored. And one of the 10.....the foreigner.....the social outsider.....the Samaritan.....is the one who connects the dots. Not only does he **see** that his skin is completely healed and his life is restored, but he remembers who has done this for him. He **sees** not only his clear skin, but he **sees** Jesus and recognizes who he is.....and he turns back to go find Jesus. He changes direction. Where have we heard that terminology before? It's the same terminology for the word 'repent.' And he turns back to give thanks to Jesus and to praise God. Notice that the healing comes before the changing of direction.

That decision to turn back completes the loop of true healing between God and us. God initiates this restoration through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of his son, Jesus, but the real healing.....the saving, if you will, comes when we turn back and respond to Jesus and to God. That's the spiritual healing that gives true life.....abundant life.....to us. God initiates. We respond and accept.

When we **see**.....when we truly **see**.....the restoration and reconciliation and true life that God has offered us through Jesus, we can't help but be overcome with joy and with gratitude. Christians should be the most joy-filled people on the planet. The other nine lepers may have felt the same joy and gratitude, but gratitude unexpressed serves no purpose at all. It's just a feeling. Gratitude unexpressed is like spiritual healing waiting to happen. For that spiritual healing to take place, we must convert those feelings into action. We must **see** and acknowledge to God what God

has done for us in order for that reconciliation with God to take place. We are active participants in that. If we want to go on our way enjoying God's healing, God will let us do that. We have to close the loop with our own action. The other nine lepers probably went on to lead happy lives restored to physical health and to their old lives, but they missed the chance to be reconciled to God when they didn't **see** or acknowledge the source of that new life.....when they didn't turn their gratitude into action and run back to stand beside Jesus and accept the complete life that Jesus was offering.

And so we turn to our own sense of gratitude.....for all that we have and for all that we are.....has been given to us by the one who created us. When we take inventory.....when we truly **see** what God has given us.....we need to convert that sense of joy and gratitude into something tangible. We need not only to say "Thank you" and to praise God which we do in our corporate worship on Sunday mornings and also in our daily lives. We need also to take stock of what we have and of what we need and of what we can share. Our tangible gifts to God.....our time and our talent and our treasure.....are expressions of our gratitude to God and our commitment to each other and to the body of Christ that is here at St. Paul's. Our tangible gifts are a way to close the loop.....to both acknowledge God's gracious abundance to us and to demonstrate our gratitude for that abundance.

We are a 'branch' of the Jesus Movement as our own Bishop Curry is fond of saying. Let's let God and the world know just how grateful we are by pooling our resources here at St. Paul's to take care of one another and to serve God's people in the world. As you take your inventory and truly **see** all the abundance that God has provided you.....even **see** the trials that are in your path and **see** that God walks with you. Let your awareness of God guide you as you prayerfully consider your pledge for this year and your response to God's gracious initiative of healing every aspect of your life. Don't settle for less than ALL that God is offering you.....the spiritual healing that gives us the true and abundant life reconciled to God. Turn back.....close the loop and express your profound gratitude to God in your pledge for 2017.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.