

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Psalm 66:1-11

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

By now, hopefully, each one of you has received a letter from our Treasurer and another letter from our Senior Warden telling you about the current stewardship campaign that is underway here at St. Paul's. When we first met to go over the timeline for the campaign this year and to divide up the areas of responsibility for each of us, I looked over the scripture passages for the month of October...just to see what I might need to work with. We picked this day, October 13 as the best day for me to preach about our stewardship campaign. I went back and looked at the scripture passages for the whole month and found that this Sunday the gospel reading is about the ten lepers healed by Jesus. I thought it would be just perfect...tailor made for a stewardship sermon. This would be easy, I thought. Ten lepers get healed and one returns. Of the 100% who got healed 10% came back. Of the ten dollars that went to each member of the congregation, one dollar returned. Obviously easy. Actually, too easy!!! The more I read this passage, the more I realized that while it seemed like an ideal passage for a sermon on stewardship, it really wasn't. And the more commentaries I read, the more I realized that I didn't really want to twist and turn this passage to try to make it fit a stewardship message. So if it's not about stewardship, what is it really about?

Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. Somewhere between Galilee and Samaria they enter a village where 10 lepers call to Jesus asking him to help them. They refer to him as 'Master,' so they know who he is. And they keep their distance as they are required to do. Jesus calls back to them and tells them to go show themselves to the priest. This is the protocol for anyone who has been cured of leprosy. The priest examines them and then declares them healed. They are then permitted to get rid of their filthy clothes and rejoin their families and their community and claim their life once again. They've gotten a reprieve from a cruel and indiscriminate illness that forced them out of their homes, away from their families, out of the community, away from any meaningful work, and out of the religious life. They had been... literally...living dead men.

All ten lepers do exactly as Jesus commands and head off to find the priest. On the way, they notice that they have been cleaned. The leprosy has completely disappeared. In its place is clear, smooth supple skin without a hint of a blemish. Can you imagine how overjoyed they must have been? Their suffering and estrangement from the rest of the world was over and they had been set free. They continue on their way to the priest. But one of the ten stops to take a look at his beautiful new skin and he sees what Jesus has done for him. The magnitude of

this gift begins to sink in and he immediately turns back praising God with a loud voice and looking for Jesus. When he finds Jesus, he throws himself down on the ground and thanks him! It's not hard to relate to this man's joy. Imagine how each of us might feel if our life had somehow been taken away from us and is then given back to us. There wouldn't be enough words...or strong enough words to express our gratitude. If this were you, wouldn't you just want to throw your arms around Jesus' neck and hug him?

Understandably, Jesus wants to know where the other nine are. 'Were not ten lepers made clean?' he says, 'But the other nine, where are they?' That's a good question. And we don't know the answer. Almost in an offhand manner and for apparently no reason, Luke does tell us that the leper who returned was a Samaritan. He was a foreigner; a despised outsider...doubly marginalized because of the leprosy. Perhaps the other nine were Jewish and felt that it was their birthright to be healed by this Master, Jesus. It didn't seem to matter to Jesus about any of the religious beliefs of the lepers or their nationality. Disease, like sin, tends to be indiscriminate. We are all vulnerable. Jesus simply says to the one who returned, "Get up and go on your way: your faith has made you well."

With that one statement, Jesus has just said a mouthful. This is more than, "You've been cleansed or you've been cured." There's a difference between cleansed and made well. There's something more here that Jesus wants us to see. The Greek word used here is *sozo* which can be translated as 'made well' or 'made whole' or 'saved.' The Samaritan's gratitude has completed the healing process that the cleansing of the leprosy had just begun. It's the Samaritan's gratitude that has saved him. He's been redeemed. He has been made whole. It's the value of the gratitude that Jesus wants us to see here. It's the importance of the gratitude that we need to understand.

When C. S. Lewis was exploring his newfound faith, he observed that the Bible, particularly the Psalter, was insistent that we praise and thank God. There's something about the gratitude that is important here. Gratitude itself, it seems, plays an important part in both our physical and our spiritual lives. Scientists and health professionals have discovered that a sense of gratitude and the expression of gratitude have measurable impact on our physical health and our mental health. It's not an accident that the most grateful people, the ones who pause to see how much there is to be thankful for and the ones who give thanks to each other and to God are among the healthiest. Scientists and doctors have discovered that people with a strong sense of gratitude sleep better and we all know that our bodies repair themselves while we are sleeping. These folks tend to have more empathy for others and a lower impulse to seek revenge when wounded. Gratitude can ease depression and increase our capacity for patience. It improves our relationships and can provide us with a sense of happiness that is lasting rather than fleeting. Our sense of gratitude gives us a glass half full rather than a glass half empty.

And just like love, gratitude comes alive when we connect it to some action. Love isn't love, you know, until you give it away. It's a feeling that's given meaning by action. And so is gratitude. There are a variety of ways that we can express our gratitude with action: we can write thank you notes, we can give someone a hug, we can use words to express our thankfulness, we can buy someone a little gift to say 'thank you' or we can do a chore for them to express our thanks. And we can devote some of our time and energy and resources to serving others who are in need.

But what about God? How do we thank God? From the beginning of time, human beings have offered the 'first fruits' of their labor to God. They've shared a part of their harvest to express their thanks. The times have changed and the method of figuring out our harvest has changed, but the gratitude toward God for the abundance that he has provided hasn't changed. In our times, our harvest tends to be reflected in our bank accounts. And we don't speak very often about our bank accounts the way we might talk about the beautiful apples we've just harvested or the plump ears of corn that will be part of the first fruits we offer to God. The first fruits may have shifted from the farmland to the bank account, but we are still thanking God with our prayers and our praise and our music, with our outreach to others, and with our presence in corporate worship and we still offer to God the first fruits of our labor. We now offer to God a portion of what is in our bank accounts. That's part of our stewardship of all that God has provided for us and one way to translate our gratitude into action. Maybe this gospel passage is more about stewardship than it seemed at first glance. Ten lepers were healed. One leper came back to say "Thank you!"

Expressing our gratitude helps to keep us healthy. Expressing our gratitude is our way of glorifying and praising God...our way of throwing our arms around God's neck....and saying "Thank you!" Expressing our gratitude is our way of becoming whole. As you prayerfully consider your pledge to St. Paul's for next year, imagine yourself throwing your arms around the neck of Jesus and hugging him. It's through our relationships with each other and with the community that we are the body of Christ in the world.

When Martin Luther was asked: "What is the nature of true worship?" He replied, "The tenth leper who turned back."

Put action to your gratitude. Be the tenth leper.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.