

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**October 13, 2019, The 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/The 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, Luke 17: 11-19

### TURNING BACK

Have you ever mailed a gift to someone, or dropped it off for them, so you weren't there when they opened it? Then you wait, and wait for the person to react to the gift you've sent, but you hear nothing?

If you mailed the present then you begin to think, "maybe it got lost in the mail and they haven't gotten it." If you dropped it off with someone, or asked someone to pass it on to them, you wonder if they forgot.

So, you wait a few more days, and still no response.

Now you're stuck, because you were really excited to give this present to them. Now you are concerned that it is lost in the mail, or it's still with the person that was supposed to deliver it for you.

You were so looking forward to your friend or family member getting this gift; you knew it was the perfect present for them, and you'd been looking forward to their reaction.

You hate to ask them directly; but eventually you do.

If you are like me, then texting seems like the least offensive way to do this. So, you write, "um, I sent you a present, just wondering if you got it?"

And then you wait for the response. Which is often a guilty, "oh I got that last week, I just got too busy to thank you, but I really loved it."

It takes some of the joy out of the gift giving doesn't it?

Equally difficult are those times you have made something for someone. Whether out of wood or yarn, or cardstock, or markers on paper, or another craft, you've created something especially for someone. You've put a lot of yourself into it. You are so excited to give it to them, and you carefully watch their face as they unwrap it. And you see them quickly arranging their face as they realize what it is, and it is clear that they really don't love it as much as you loved it for them.

I sometimes make baskets out of crocheted cloth. They take a lot of time to make, preparing the cloth and then using a huge crochet hook, creating and shaping the basket. Years ago, I carefully selected material for friends, and made quite a large basket for them for Christmas. When they open it, they had "that" look on their faces—what is it and why did she give it to us? Then their teenage son grabbed it and stuck it on his head like a hat and began a crazed dance around the living room, symbolically capturing exactly what his parents thought of this treasure I'd created.

Seeing me trying to rearrange my face, his mother snatched it off his head and thanked me profusely for the beautiful gift I'd made for them. The next time I came to visit she excitedly told me, "we found a great use for your basket, just look under the kitchen sink." There under the kitchen sink was my carefully crafted basket, holding the sponges and the extra dish drainer, and a used SOS pad.

I wished they'd just let their son keep it as a hat!

It is sometimes risky to give gifts to others. We can't control how they will react, whether or not they'll like the gift, or if they will even say thank you.

This morning we come to a story about Jesus and the gift of healing he gave to ten men who had leprosy.

There is a lot going on in the story that may not be obvious to us when we first hear it, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But to Jesus, the 10 lepers, and everyone who heard the story later, they were well aware of all the undercurrents.

First the place where this story happens is the region between Samaria and Galilee. The Holy Land in Jesus' day was composed of Galilee in the north, the region where Jesus was raised and did a lot of his ministry.

In the south was Judah, the ancient home of the Jews, and the location of the capital city of Jerusalem.

In between Galilee and Judah was the region called Samaria. Because of what happened back in 722 B.C. the people of Samaria and the Jews had a very rocky and divided history. Jews looked down on Samaritans and considered them outside of God's kingdom and God's plan.

A good Jewish person spent as little time as they could in the region of Samaria, and passed through it quickly.

We need to remember that Jesus, the man, was a product of his time and place in history. He would have heard throughout his life, from childhood on, that Samaritans were not good people; they were not God's people.

Next there is the fact that these ten men have leprosy. In Jesus' day, the term leprosy could refer to a variety of skin diseases, not just what we know as leprosy today. The Jewish laws of the Old Testament were very clear that lepers could not live among other people.

People with leprosy in Jesus' day had to keep at a distance from everyone. The laws of Moses found in Leviticus (Lev. 13) stated that:

All lepers are outcasts

and they must cover the lower halves of their faces,

and when in public they must shout out the words:

"Unclean, unclean" to warn the rest of the people of their approach,

Because they were unclean according to Jewish religious laws.

You may have noticed in the reading from Luke that Jesus was in an area between Galilee and Samaria. He was in that no-man's land between these divided peoples, away from the villages and towns, and it was there that the lepers lived.

People with leprosy were separated from their families, from their villages and from the synagogues and the Temple in Jerusalem. They were separated from God and God's people.

According to Jewish law, the only way they could be allowed back to their families and communities was if all the skin conditions went away, and the priest in their synagogue named them as clean again.

We learn the final piece of this story after Jesus has healed the men. These 10 men, who lived together in no-man's land, joined by their leprosy, were actually from different parts of Palestine.

Nine of them were Jews, probably from Galilee, and one of them was a Samaritan.

If they hadn't had leprosy, they never would have talked to each other, let alone lived in the same area.

So, as we read this morning, when Jesus the healer, was passing from Galilee to Samaria these ten men called out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

They knew that they were cured when Jesus said to them: "Go and show yourselves to the priests." The only ones who could declare them clean were the priests.

With the priest's affirmation that the leprosy was gone and they were cured, they could leave the no-man's land and go home--home to their families, home to their villages, home to their synagogues, home to their lives.

Luke says that as the 10 men ran toward the priests, one of them, seeing that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He threw himself to the ground at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

Then Jesus asked the man at his feet, and those he was traveling with: "Weren't ten men cured of their leprosy? Where are the other nine? Could no one come back to say thank you except this foreigner, this outsider, this Samaritan?"

For over thirty years I have been preaching on this story from Luke, and this is the place the sermon always takes a turn, and you are invited to be thankful people.

It's a pretty predictable part of the sermon, you probably saw it coming, even before I told you it was coming.

But before I go there, I want to tell you that I heard something different in this familiar story this week and it has gotten me thinking about this old story in new ways. What caught my attention was Jesus' question: "Could no one come back to say thank you except this foreigner, this outsider, this Samaritan?"

At first reading it seems like a pretty racist question that Jesus is asking. Why does it matter what country this cured man came from? Isn't it more important that he showed us how to be thankful, by being thankful and praising God?

Now Jesus was a man of his times, born and raised as a Jewish man, born and raised to despise and stay away from Samaritans.

But Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God was so much more than that. Jesus was never held back from the divisions his culture and his religion held. He was known for eating with tax collectors and sinners, he was known for talking to women and welcoming children. He broke through barriers all the time to welcome people into the kingdom of God. So why did he ask this question?

What if this question comes from a totally different place? What if we hear this question asked in weariness and sadness, and not in some racist rant? Jesus knew that he was the Messiah, the Savior, sent to God's chosen people the Jews.

The prophets had prepared Israel through the generations to expect that the Messiah would one day come to them.

Jesus had shown them in words, in miracles, in healings, that he was that Messiah

Yet, it was as though the very church people Jesus had come to love and save were blind to who he was.

How could there not be a deep sadness, when those that should have realized they were in the presence of the promised Messiah kept running toward the priests.

And it was the Samaritan who ran toward him.

It would have only taken a few minutes, but the church people didn't turn back to say thank you.

The more I spent time with Jesus' question, the more I began to hear it as Jesus' question for us today:

Why aren't the church people coming to say thank you?

Why aren't the people who know who I am, saying thank for all I do in their lives?

Why aren't the churches filled with more gratefulness and thanksgiving?

We believe that Jesus on earth, showed us the face and heart of God.

This week, in the story of the 10 lepers, I hear the heart of God wondering where we are.

You may ask, does the Creator of the Universe need our thanks? No, of course not.  
But, does the Creator of the Universe long for us to see the love that we have been given and respond with grateful hearts?

Yes, I believe God does long for us.

So many gifts have been given to us. And we know sometimes its risky to give gifts to others You can't always control how they will react, whether or not they'll like the gift, or if they will even say thank you.

God showers us with gifts daily.

And this story leaves me with an image of God waiting for us to turn back to say thank you.

May we not leave God wondering where we are.

May we follow in the footsteps of that long-ago Samaritan, and daily turn back again, and again, and again with grateful joy,

to thank the one who gives us life,

who blesses us with family and friends,

who names us as sons and daughters of God,

who does not leave us alone in seasons of illness and grief,

who paints the sky each sunrise and sunset,

who lived and died and rose again so that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

For the love of God, may we be known as people and as a church family who turn back to say thank you!

Amen.