

How Can I Give Thanks?

October 9, 2022

Unclean

They were supposed to cry out, “Unclean.” He knew it. The other nine knew it. The law said so.

Ever since he had started to lose feeling in his fingers and toes, he had been calling out whenever he saw someone. “Unclean.”

What he was really saying was, “Don’t come near me.”

What he was really saying was, “There is something wrong with me.”

What he was really saying was, “I am not a pretty sight.”

He was saying, “I’m contagious. If you get so close so as to even breathe the air I breathe, you might be next.”

They were supposed to cry out, “Unclean.” So that’s what they always did.

Can you imagine that? Physically? Socially? Emotionally? What do you think it does to someone’s psyche to be so categorically isolated? Every day, more skin would flake off. Every day, he would watch lovers holding hands, and another part of him would die as he wept into his own hands which were scaly, maybe even missing a finger or two.

Living with leprosy in the first century would have been harrowing, physically and psychologically. Isolated from friends and family, our lepers would have had to dig into those deep reserves where we learn who we are and what makes us tick, what we value, and what makes life worth living. They would have had to have wrestled with the fact that the way that they would have answered those questions before had to be very different now.

Before, being able to tickle a baby until it squealed with laughter could make everything come into focus. Before, they had been lovers and mothers and fishermen. But who would buy fish from a leper? No father with leprosy would kiss his daughter’s skinned knee. A leper in the first century would have to do that deep self work of re-imagining who they were because all that had been meaningful before was falling away, piece by piece. Their bodies were dying off, piece by piece, and so were their hearts.

I always tell you that in healing stories, especially in the Gospel of Luke, the ailments need to be understood both physically AND symbolically. And, those who aren’t physically healed are usually the worse off, because the psycho-spiritual ailment remains.

As we read about ten people suffering from a disease which was horribly disfiguring, a disease which manifested through ever increasing insensitivity, a disease whose social ramifications were ostracism and alienation, we would be remiss if we thought that disfigurement, that increasing insensitivity, that ostracism and alienation were only skin deep. And that, my friends, can be our access point. Most of us will never encounter Hansen’s Disease or many of the other severe skin ailments which were lumped together in the scriptures under the umbrella name of leprosy, but especially after the past two and a half years, many of us do understand being

isolated, many of us do understand a growing desensitization, many of us do know what it is to be psychically disfigured. It is when we can access those places in our lives, and in the lives of those around us, that we have a chance of finding how this can be Good News for us in the here and now.

A New Story

My friend and mentor, Dr. Judy Logue, has studied the interweaving of healing and conversion throughout her career. In her book, “Forgiving the People We Love to Hate,” she writes that true healing happens when we learn to tell our stories in a different way. Our lepers from today’s Gospel offer us a true picture of healing when they turn from calling out, “Unclean, I’m dirty, I’m dangerous,” and begin calling out, “Have pity on us.” Because, what does, “Have pity on us” mean, but “I think change can happen,” and “I believe in you,” and “I want life to be different, and I think you can help.” This conversion of thought, this grasping at hope, is miraculous.

Last month at our annual all-church retreat at our church camp, Moon Beach in Saint Germaine, another colleague of mine, Rev. Andrew Warner, guided us through an exercise in articulating why our church exists. He leaned on the work of Simon Sinek who looked at an array of great leaders, from MLK to Apple to the Wright Brothers, and found that great leaders are able to articulate their “Why.” For great leaders, the answers to questions of what is your purpose, what is your cause, what is your belief, why does your organization exist, are strong.

To help Union better articulate our “why,” Rev. Warner invited us into Sinek’s three-step process of creating our “Golden Circle,” and I thought it could be meaningful for us to revisit that process this month as we undertake our Stewardship Season and prayerfully ask ourselves what this church means to us and how we are called to commit our resources to its thriving. Two weeks ago, everyone in worship was invited to write down four impactful things that Union does, and stick them on the wall to my left. That is Union’s “What.”

This week, I’d like you to take some time to think about Union’s “How.” This question isn’t quite as straightforward, so let me offer an example from the retreat. Someone on the retreat was reflecting on the fact that Union really strives to root itself in Jesus’ love, rather than Jesus’ exclusivity, that we start from the premise that “you are God’s beloved,” rather than “you’re not worthy and only Jesus’ death on a cross can change that.” We then lifted up the idea that a church like ours still believes in the power of God to transform our lives, but rather than it being an effort to conform to church leaders’ expectations of what a Godly life looks like, at Union we see the power of God’s transformation as we discover ever more deeply who we are and who God calls us to be. The more we can access our authentic selves, the better equipped we are to embody God’s healing grace in the world.

And so, with the three Post-its that you find in your bulletins today, I invite you to write down Union’s “how” in a sentence or two. Our “how” is the process of creating what we offer, and the values that underlie our church. If you’re new or a visitor, write down the values that you think a church should have, and if you’re worshiping with us online, I’d love it if you would share your answers in the comments. After worship, please bring your Post-its forward, and make another ring inside of the Post-its that we put up two weeks ago naming “what” Union does.

Scripture

One of the “hows” of a church like Union that I’m deeply grateful for is our dynamic interpretation of scripture. We don’t simply take a text at face value; rather, we pull on the threads to see what new Good News can be found, especially if an antiquated interpretation isn’t satisfying. For generations, our Gospel text has been given titles like, “The One Thankful Leper,” and many of us have been regaled with sermons and Bible Studies praising the Samaritan leper who comes back to thank Jesus, while condemning the nine Jewish lepers who do not return. There’s nothing inherently wrong with saying that Jesus would want us to be thankful, but there’s something about that reading of this story that doesn’t sit quite right. After all, verse 14 tells us that Jesus told all ten, “Go, and show yourselves to the priests,’ and on their way they were made clean.”

For those of us who try to follow the rules, condemning the nine who continue on to the temple and do not return to Jesus seems capricious and arbitrary. How were they to know that they should disobey Jesus in order to follow their hearts, and turn around to thank him? What if they did so, and their leprosy returned?

No, Luke is so clever in this text, that many a modern-day preacher misses his intent in this passage. You see, the nine lepers who continued on the way to the temple already had a way to glorify God, but the Samaritan would have been denied access at the gate. To be sure, he returned to Jesus because he was ecstatically grateful, but even more concretely, he returned to Jesus because he could not go to the temple. Samaritans, the outcasts of the outcasts, were forbidden from setting foot on that holy ground.

So, what if Jesus’ lesson isn’t to look down upon the other nine, but rather that their need was not the same, their journey of healing was not the same. The nine obeyed Jesus, went to the temple, and presumably praised God. They had a traditional, time-honored way to give thanks. But the Samaritan leper wouldn’t have been welcome there, and so he found a different way. The other nine, they maintained traditional means of thanking and praising, and that is well and good for many.

But for some, especially those who have been pushed to the margins, finding a way to offer thanks and praise which is genuine to who they are and their life experience, that is truly a miracle. And so, like the other healing stories in the Gospel of Luke, the people who had been lepers are healed not only of their skin disease but also their isolation and ostracization and their insensitivity, while Jesus’ listeners, those who were sure of the one right way to be and one right way to do things continue to see their own isolation and insensitivity grow. The smug are not healed.

This reading makes this a story for adult children of alcoholics who will choose to spend Thanksgiving with friends instead of family, a story for people who are coming out and are no longer willing to follow the family code of silence, a story for everyone who has been on the margins and is thankful for the opportunity to forge ahead with health and wholeness. With the ten healed lepers, we learn that there are multiple sacred possibilities besides the most obvious, beside the road most taken.

Conclusion

Wherever we place the miracle in this text, whether it is in the marginalized finding their voice and acknowledging their need, whether it is in the healing itself, or whether it is in responding to life in ways that are genuine and integrated, ways that make sense in YOUR life, what wraps this text together is gratitude.

As we focus on stewardship all month, I'm conscious that at the center of stewardship is gratitude – being grateful for what we have been given, and then using it well. The Samaritan in today's Gospel used their voice well. They used their body well as he turned toward Jesus, and they used their newfound health well as they discovered an integrated way to give thanks and praise. May we all have a portion of their pluck and God's grace. Amen.

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