

## Have Mercy on Us

Luke 17:11-19

All of us know of prayer. The words of our scripture remind us that we all have situations and circumstances that bring us to our knees and we need God's mercy on us. We need God's mercy on our families and relationships. We may be caring for children, or a spouse, or a parent. In each situation we need God's mercy. Your concern may be in the area of health. We need God's mercy for our health or the health of a loved one. We need God's mercy as we face doctor's appointments, have treatments, take medications and deal with the side effects of those medications. We need God's mercy in the area of our finances, whether it is making ends meet, credit card bills, paying our property taxes, students loans (ours or our children's), or medical bills. We need God's mercy as we think about whether we have saved any or enough for retirement, if we will be blessed to live that long. We need God's mercy in our community, water crisis, public officials, poor relationships with neighbors, lack of concern for one another. We need God's mercy in the church: relationships, concern about resources and finances and whether this ministry will be here for our children and grandchildren, and whether they chose to make it a part of their lives. We all need God to have mercy on us.

Our experience is that we pray and sometimes things happen, but sometimes we pray and our situations don't change, but maybe we change or not. "Your faith has made you well" is one of those verses from Scripture that has done as much harm as good. On the one hand, many of us have given joyful thanks to God after recovering from an illness or an accident. Just as many of us do not recover, even though we may have prayed just as hard and just as often. Is the problem with our prayers? Some of us assume our prayers are inferior if our prayers did not "work,"

but perhaps the problem is with our understanding of faith. Often Christians think of faith as being all about cause and effect—you pray for something, and it either happens or it does not happen.

There is good news for us this morning: Jesus points to a more profound understanding of faith in this story about the ten lepers who were healed. In this account, the actual healing was almost a sideline event. Jesus did it without fanfare. We do not know where nine of the ten went, but we do know that one—a foreigner, and a despised one at that—came back to bow down at Jesus' feet, to worship and give thanks. It is difficult to know what tone Jesus used as he questioned the whereabouts of the other nine. Was he sad? Was he angry? Was he flabbergasted? What he did make clear is that the most unlikely one, the double outcast, had been embraced by grace. "Get up and go," he said, "your faith has made you well"

"Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." What does that mean? Was there something about this man that was more well, healthier, than the other nine? Apparently. Did his gratitude have something to do with his faith? Apparently. Jesus seemed to be uninterested in the man's religion. We know only that he was a Samaritan. We do not know what his theology or moral values were—whether he was pro-choice or pro-life, how he voted or spent his Sabbath. All we really know about him is that he recognized a gift when he saw and experienced it, that he returned to say, "Thank you," and that Jesus said to him, "Your faith has made you well." That is surely to say that by Jesus' definition, faith and gratitude are very closely related, that faith without gratitude is not faith at all, and that there is something life giving about gratitude.

The man's wellness was more than being rid of his dread disease. Biblical scholars point out the way the Bible uses the concepts of wellness, wholeness, and salvation almost interchangeably. "Your faith has made you well/made you

whole/saved you." Being grateful and saying thank you are absolutely at the heart of God's hope for the human race and God's intent for each of us.

There is evidence that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. "Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude" was the title of a Web launch by a medical group. The essay cited thousands of years of philosophic and religious teaching urging gratitude and then cited new evidence that grateful people, for whom gratitude is a permanent trait, have a health edge. It may be that grateful people take better care of themselves, but there is evidence that gratitude alone is a stress reducer, that grateful people are more hopeful, and that there are links between gratitude and the immune system. So your mother was right when she made you call or write your grandmother and thank her for the birthday card. **John M. Buchanan**

Jesus offered the grateful leper a wellness that runs beyond the physical. All ten were physically finished with leprosy. Imagine the other nine going on their way. Presumably they headed to the priests and were restored to a full and happy life, but what were they thinking? Their failure to thank Jesus revealed a sort of utilitarianism at best: "Well, that worked, didn't it!" Or maybe their lack of gratitude was about entitlement: "Well, I certainly deserved that." It was that sort of utilitarianism that Jesus discouraged in his exchange with the disciples about the mustard seed and that sort of entitlement that he condemned in the parable about the master and the servant from last week's scripture (17:5-10).

Once again, then, we hear Jesus telling us not to be concerned with the quantity of faith—whether we have enough to make our prayers "work," as if faith were a matter of cause and effect. Rather, Jesus is teaching us about the nature of faith. To "have faith" is to live faith, and to live faith is to give thanks. It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith—*this* is the grateful sort of faith that made this man from Samaria truly and deeply well.

We might almost say, in fact, that "faith" and "gratitude" are two words for the same thing: to practice gratitude is to practice faith. If faith is not something we have, but something we do—something we live—then in living we express our complete trust in God. How then can we not practice gratitude, when we know that God, the giver of all good gifts, holds all of life in His loving hands? When we practice gratitude, we find that faith is given in abundance, pressed down and overflowing.

Our scripture completes the sequence that began with Luke 17:1. Jesus taught the demands of the Christian life are great, and sometimes we do not think we are well enough equipped, but Jesus reminds us that living out our faith—by revering God's ways, by honoring one another, and by giving thanks in all things—we are given all the faith that we require. **Kimberly Bracken Long**

This is where the story reaches each of us—those of us healed and those of us still sick, those of us delivered and those of us still bound, those of us successful and those of us out of work. If prayers of thanks are part of the soul's healing and deliverance and flourishing, the physical circumstances of the one who prays become less important. It is the thanking that saved the grateful leper, and such thankfulness is available to all in every circumstance. One of us can give thanks for our pleasant experience, while another of us thanks God for keeping us secure during hardships. We may even imagine the lepers who were not cleansed; surely there had to be more than ten by the road; thanking God for being present to them in their infirmity.

To practice gratitude intentionally changes our individual lives, to be sure. The practice of gratitude can also change the character of this congregation. When Christians practice gratitude, we come to worship not just to "get something out of it," but to give thanks and praise to God. Stewardship is transformed from fundraising to the glad gratitude of joyful givers. The mission of the church

changes from ethical duty to the work of grateful hands and hearts. Prayer includes not only our intercessions and supplications, but also our thanksgivings in all things, especially at the Lord's table.

There are those who believe that worship—this practice of gratitude—is almost primal, an essential part of being human. John Burkhart once wondered whether "humans can survive as humans without worshiping. To withhold acknowledgment, to avoid celebration, to stifle gratitude, may prove as unnatural as holding one's breath." Worship is certainly at the heart of the Christian life, and the story of the one who returned to give thanks points us to that truth. God promises to be at work in the world, in our church, in our lives; so we cannot but give thanks.

"Go on your way; your faith has made you well" is no longer a problematic saying, even when physical healing does not come. Instead, it is a description of a life of blessing for the church: as we go on our way, we rejoice and give thanks; for in giving thanks in all things, we find that God, indeed, is the One who gives us mercy in all things. **Kimberly Bracken Long**

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