

Sermons at Christ Church

Building Relationships Through Love.

Pentecost 18

Rev. Emmanuel Mercer

*Help me to remember to pause on my daily pilgrimage. Teach me to live with a vigilant heart. Make of me a rising dawn. Strum a melody of blessing with my life. Make my power to love stronger than my love of power. Let me rejoice in the harvest of each dying day and transform me into a song of gratitude. **Amen.***

“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.” He couldn’t believe that he had been healed. He couldn’t believe that he would be integrated into society. This leper couldn’t believe that he had been given another chance at life.

And so, with a heart full of gratitude, he comes praising God for what Jesus had done for him. Scripture doesn’t reveal the identities of the other nine, but it makes it a point to identify this Samaritan who was supposedly outside the bounds of God’s grace. He was full of praise.

The good news is that the Samaritan who was considered to be an outsider didn’t take the gift of healing for granted. And so should you not take any gift for granted. When last did you feel like praising God for what God has God done for you? Praise. Praise. Praise. Your praise shall always be in my mouth-not because of what you have done for me but because of who you are to me. My praise song then is, there but for the grace of God, go I.

I once heard a story about a wife who have had a couple of bouts with cancer. During the period of the wife’s cancer battle, the couple started keeping a gratitude journal. Every week during their sabbath, they shared their gratitude with each other. One of the things that the wife usually wrote and which got the husband emotional was “I’m still here.”

After two bouts with cancer, you don’t take anything for granted. Rather, you become filled with gratitude such that you do not only celebrate the gift of life that you have, but you come to understand that life, as beautiful as it is, is very fragile, and that it is only God whose mercies makes us strong-to the point where we can endure all things through Christ who strengthen us.

This view of life is so central to what it means to follow Jesus. It is for this reason that, you count your blessings, name them one by one, but you are not surprised at what the Lord has done because like the ten lepers, you know the Lord to be near enough to hear your plea for help. The praise song then is, there but for the grace of God go I.

The reality is, God's mercies don't have to specifically initiate an overt miracle in our lives before we acknowledge and give thanks for it. For some of us, we need to see a concrete act of God before we can praise but we tend to forget that life itself, the gift of life itself, whether infested with leprosy or not, demands our praise because it is God who has freely given it to us.

Yesterday at the Center for Spiritual Nourishment, where I lead a monthly class, Conversations with Manny, I shared with the group that to become a truly and fully human soul involves three stages of transformation or conversion- first, purgation, second, illumination and third, union. I'd like us to focus on Illumination. Illumination is experienced as crisis manifested in tears, anguish and despair- like the situation of the ten lepers.

Illumination is the awareness that life does get rough, and like the lepers we read in the gospel story, we can feel abandoned, ostracized by family and friends and banned from participating in communal life.

Like the ten lepers, we stand in the valley of darkness, we are in a place of deep distress, the place of our deepest troubles, the place of our discomfort, the place of our tears, outside the city gates where no one wants to see us or fraternize with us. Even there, when we cry out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us," it is as if our eyes have been opened to see the one God who doesn't abandon us, leave us alone or close his ear to our pleading because He is full of mercy.

It is this illumination, eye opening experience that provides us with the reason to sing of God's praise, even when we are in total despair.

And so, when we sing out our praise, there but for the grace of God go I, we are simply reminding ourselves that God's mercy is far reaching, God's mercy never abandons us and that like the one leper who returned with praise, a gratitude filled praise should always be on our lips.

An interesting incident happened at a hospital recently. I had gone to visit a parishioner, who told me about another patient on the same floor who was sicker. The illumination came at the moment when the parishioner said, "Thank God I am not as sick as the other patient."

It isn't a denial of the prevailing circumstance, it is an acknowledgement that despite that circumstance, God's mercy still abounds. And because that mercy still abounds, we ran like the leper to Jesus with praise to thank God for what God has done for us. And our praise song is, there but for the grace of God, go I.

There's a story of Venerable Bede-an English Benedictine monk who wrote about Caedmon in the 7th century. Caedmon is reputed to be the first English poet. But Caedmon was an illiterate who wondered how he could praise God. This is an example of the literal translation of his poem:

Guardian of heaven whom we come to praise
who mapped creation in His thought's sinews
Glory-Father who worked out each wonder
began with broad earth a gift for His children
first roofed it with heaven the Holy Shaper
established it forever as in the beginning
called it middle kingdom fenced it with angels
created a habitation for man to praise His splendor

We praise because there is a poet in each of us. And the poet in us always rises beyond itself to sing of God's praise-there but for the grace of God, go I. How lately have you offered any praise?

The task of the poet, and in fact our task is to point to the place where even those who hold us in bondage can find mercy. The task of the poet is to point to a new life that is made possible through Jesus. The poet in us must give voice to our praise so we can sing not only about what God has done for us but what God continues to do for us. The poet in us reminds us that God's generosity touches the saint and the sinner, the Jew and the Samaritan. The slave and the free.

When the poet within us feels the transformation of life, it praises with indescribable joy like the Samaritan leper. There but for the grace of God, go I.

After church one Sunday, little Johnny suddenly announced to his mother, “Mom, I have decided I’m going to be a minister when I grow up. “That’s ok with us” Johnny’s mother said. But then she got a little curious and asked “But what made you decide to be a minister?” “Well,” little Johnny said, “I’ll have to go to church on Sunday anyway, and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell than to sit and listen.”

Karl Barth wrote that “Joy is the simplest form of gratitude.” The joyful praise of the Samaritan leper who returned to give thanks helps us to understand that the illumined mind recognizes that the foundation of all praise is gratitude-grateful people see so much in the world to be thankful for, and with them the good outweighs the evil, love overpowers jealousy and light drives darkness out of their lives.

Spiritual guide and counselor, Henri Nouwen, describes the movement from resentment to gratitude as a conscious choice. It’s about choosing to be grateful, even when you’re not really feeling it. Nouwen offers a vivid image to illustrate this movement. One day he saw a sculptor chipping pieces of stone off of a large rock. He began to envision that the rock must be suffering terribly and wondered why the sculptor would inflict so much pain on it.

Then, as he continued to watch, he saw the figure of a graceful dancer emerging gradually from the rock. Nouwen realized that he had spent a great deal of his life building a protective rock wall around his heart. He also realized that every time he overcame his fear and chose to be grateful, he felt as if one of the stones had been removed from the wall. It hurt a little every time a stone of resentment was pulled out.

But as he became aware of the presence of God’s hands working on him, Nouwen also began to realize that his life and everything in it was a gift calling for gratitude-providing him the chance to live thankfully each day.

More than that, we invite you to a stewardship season of praise, praise to the God who fills our lives with his presence. Praise to the God who makes all this possible. Praise to the God who heals us and transforms our lives. Praise to the God who offers meaning to our lives. Praise to the God who gave us the gift of Elijah, whose baptism reminds us of our own baptism and the duty we owe him by being good stewards.

Don't wait for an extraordinary miracle to happen in your life before you run to Jesus with thanks- relish each morning as a blessing, experience each day as a gift to be cherished, embrace each moment of your life as an opportunity to praise, recognize all blessings, big or small as an imprint of God's hand on your life and don't forget the praise song, there but for the grace of God, go I. Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your heart.

Amen.