

Message – The Big Read
Lent III – March 26-27, 2011
Luke 17:11-19
Thank You

Author, social activist and new monastic, Shane Claiborne tells his story of traveling to a leper colony outside of Calcutta at the invitation of Mother Teresa, probably around the early 1990s. It seems that more than twenty years ago a plot of land, was donated to Mother Teresa. It really wasn't a gift of gratitude, as the land was absolutely useless and ran right alongside the noise of the railroad tracks. But, because she gave thanks for every gift, Mother Teresa found good use for the land. Gathering up groups of people plagued with leprosy, she brought them to this plot of land. Once settled, she began caring for these untouchables, bathing their wounds and tending their brokenness. Then something happened. Over time, under her care, the colony began to care for one another: growing their own produce, raising their own livestock, sewing their own clothes and bed lines, and putting together the supplies for the medical clinic housed in the colony. People, once labeled lepers, came to understand the gift of giving and receiving. These lost and alone, now see themselves as children of God, all caring for one another and loving one another.

During his stay, Claiborne learned from one leprosy victim that for many living in the colony, the words "thank you" had never even been a part of their vocabulary. They didn't use "thank you" because, they hadn't experienced gratitude. Until the tender love of Mother Teresa, and their learning to truly love one another, they didn't know how to say thank you. Today, this colony now houses some 150 families, all living in faithful, healing hope and all saying thank you.

Leprosy, was in Jesus' time, and is now, a disease of devastation. Not so much because of the physical symptoms of leprosy. But, because leprosy socially, emotionally and spiritually isolates and alienates. Now, in the book of Leviticus, God gives Moses instructions on how the holy should live Godly lives. Leviticus is a book of priestly laws. And, the priests in Moses' time are big decision makers about how to live holy, Godly lives. In fact, the priests have the responsibility of determining whether or not someone is ceremoniously clean or unclean. According to the Law, uncleanness is the result of touching a dead person (we remember that from the story of the Good Samaritan who helps the man left for dead after the Levite and the priest pass him by for fear of uncleanness); or touching a dead animal, or eating inappropriate foods; or touching a person deemed unclean. Chapters 13 and 14, in Leviticus, some 113 verses, explain, in detail, leprosy as a disease of uncleanness. The code teaches that a person with an eruption or a swelling spot, spreading across his body, and perhaps appearing to be more than skin deep, must be examined by a priest. Upon examination, should the diagnosis be leprosy, you're isolated a minimum of seven days which easily could be extended. To add to your unsightly appearance, leprosy persons are commanded to wear torn clothing, and disheveled hair. And, if for some strange reason a person decides to reach out to you in your state of dismay and embarrassment, you're to cover your upper lip and call out the warning, "unclean, unclean" (Lev. 13:45-46) so they'll know to keep their distance. Once rendered unclean, you're also rendered unholy and excluded from the temple. In

other words, uncleanness, is impurity for whatever reason, alienating you from the community.

Now, there are some misconceptions about leprosy. Only two forms of the disease actually manifest itself with disfiguration and lesions and scales on the skin. Often it is that leprosy, or what is known today as Hansen's disease, does not show visible signs. Physical deformities from the deadening of nerve endings preventing the use of limbs are rare and often not revealed for years and years, and only when the disease is untreated. We remember also, that in Jesus' time, and especially in Luke's gospel, idiopathic diseases are punishment from God for our sins or the sins of our family members for which we suffer the consequences. Regardless of the reason, what leprosy does do, is cast us out. Lepers are not welcome, can't conform, aren't included, are labeled and stereotyped as sick, and a menace to society.

I imagine, at some time or the other, we've all suffered from the symptoms of leprosy; the feeling of isolation and alienation; the hurt and woundedness of being cast out. So, then, how hard we'll seek and search and compromise who we are and what we are to be "*in*" to know the comfort of inclusion, because we put a great deal of value and worth on being included, don't we? And, maybe it is, too, that in paying the price for inclusion we'll cast out others, not include others, at the cost of including ourselves. Because, *it is that we want to be a part of the community*; we want to do good; we want to rejoice and celebrate God's healing, saving grace in our lives. But, sometimes it is that we suffer from diseases of jealousy, resentment, rage and fear which result in the separation of God's children becoming untouchables. Then, we lose reason to give thanks to God.

Our story in Luke's gospel of The Big Read, is a story of remembering why we give thanks. The story begins with the third mention of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. Clearly Luke's writer is reminding us of Jesus' destiny, the promise of love and acceptance, hope and inclusion, faith and wholeness; the journey that takes us to the cross and emerges from the tomb with new life in Jesus; a Jesus who chooses to walk along the borderlands of inclusion granting us the grateful freedom of the full community of patience, understanding, and healing love. Jesus is traveling north from the Jewish region of Galilee, south to Samaria, probably along the edge of Samaria before making the turn westward at Jericho in Judea to Jerusalem. We remember that Samaritans and Jews are not friendly. But, perhaps the author of Luke is using this technique to remind us of Jesus' willingness to always travel to those places where it is unfriendly, where he will not be popular, that the road to healing and wholeness, as we journey along, can often be a dangerous and uncomfortable road with lots of unknowns, where only faith and trust can guide us. So it is in the case of Jesus, traveling along on the outskirts of the town, where he comes upon a colony of those cast out.

This past week, I was in Philadelphia visiting with a friend. Coming in along I95, I wanted to stop, hopefully along the Delaware River, for just a bit, to read and just get my bearings, and say my prayers. So, I pulled off, only to land in an apparently dangerous part of Philadelphia, just on the edge of town. Often, I've wondered why it is that as we

enter some of the most significant, places in our history, those towns and cities that have carved out our identity, that the entrance is so unattractive and unwelcoming.

Just within Jesus' sight, In obedience to the laws of cleanliness, a group of at least 10 men suffering from leprosy stand just on the edge of town. We could make the argument that they're cast out because they carry a contagious disease. Two things about biblical leprosy: leprosy is the name for a broad range of skin diseases, as basic as acne and as severe as cancer; and the other is that leprosy is rarely contagious. The truth is, these men, while no different than you and me, have been asked by the community to not join in. It's easier to push them out where they're not seen and pretend they don't exist than to do what is just and right. But, not for Jesus one wise scholar reminds us. He says, we just have this idea that "the only way to achieve union is to gather together a group of absolutely good and healed people....Jesus says, "give thanks that, the only way to achieve union is through failure, vulnerability, and repair" (Rhor, Richard, The Good News According to Luke).

One way or the other, through their failure, vulnerability and hopes for repair, these men know about Jesus and they race, as close as the law permits, to meet him. We remember that Jesus heals a man suffering from leprosy at the beginning of his Galilean ministry. Maybe the hopeful news has traveled to these 10. Maybe it is that living in faith brings us to the edge where hope awaits. Thomas Aquinas writes, "spontaneously we love God, we run towards him, we get close to him,..." we surrender our soul to God. They shout out, not to warn Jesus. They cry out, begging for his mercy. Not to disregard the law, Jesus gives the command. "Go and show yourselves to the priests." The priests, we remember, may perform a ritual cleansing with the ancient combination of two live birds, herbs and crimson colored yarn. Following the cleansing the person washes body and clothes thoroughly and shaves off all his or her hair and the priest declares the infected person clean. On their way to the priest, the 10 are miraculously made clean. Maybe it is the skin disease goes away. But, we all know that scales, inflammations and lesions, cut and scratches, and acne and sun burns just don't instantaneously vanish. However, Jesus is about miracles. Most likely, the marks are still showing. The scars continue to form. Rather, the cleansing is what happens in their heart and soul. These lepers, are made not just clean. They are made holy and their cleansing results with the reflection of God's glory. And, when we walk around, holy, beaming in the brilliance of God's glory, then our status is changed. God's glory does not keep us alienated. Nor does God's glory delay or wait for our return. God's glory is a gift graciously and abundantly extended, given from a God who loves and cherishes us, calling us his own, setting us apart as his holy kingdom dwellers. And for this, we give thanks.

We have entitled this message "thank you" and the banner outside says, "thank you", which, by the way, isn't a bad banner to have posted on the front lawn of the church. (I'd love to sit out there in a lawn chair and stop cars as they drive past and ask them what they're thankful for). But, the message is really about faith. Mother Teresa, writes, "holiness is not the luxury of a few. It is everyone's duty: yours and mine." "We are called not to be successful but to be faithful." This is a story of Jesus' faith in God's cleansing power upon us, renewing a right Spirit within us; a story about, our faith to run

towards him, trusting in his mercy, even if it is that our Jesus is more than an arms length away. This is a story of faithful return to the holiness of giving thanks.

Cleansed of their sin, **just one** turns back to give thanks and nine go on without a moment's thought of gratitude for the miracle of Jesus' healing. Now, perhaps it is that the nine are still honoring the Mosaic code and they're going to seek priestly blessing for their cleansing. Because, faithful people want to do the right thing. Or, maybe it is, having been set apart, they're just grateful to get home and see their families after their confinement. Or, perhaps, **having gotten what they need**, they're on to the next thing, grateful to return to normal life; go back to the way things used to be before isolation and hurt and suffering; grateful to return to the normal of school and work, and family and household management; grateful to just be in the status quo.

But, one decides that normal isn't good enough. Going back to what was just isn't going to work any more. For now, life is cleansed and radiantly beaming with God's saving grace. So, he turns back, shouting to Jesus, gloriously giving thanks and praise to God for a life transformed into possibility and promise!

Early this week, nine days after a magnitude 9.0 earthquake followed by a devastating tsunami, ripped through Japan leaving thousands missing, when all hope seemed lost, two lone voices could be heard amidst the rubble. Rescue workers, pulled from the wreckage an 80 year old woman and her sixteen year old grandson. Both are well, having managed to survive on food still in the refrigerator. And, while ruin and wreckage and despair and disease surround Japan right now, the rescue of Jin and Sume Abe is great cause for celebration, where we all gloriously collapse at the feet of Jesus for lives found and saved and shout out praise and thanksgiving to God.

Now, this **one** who returns, oddly enough, he's not the one we'd expect to come back. Aren't the ones who come back the ones who are accustomed to being included, popular among those in the community, knowing they'll be readily accepted? The faithful who give honor to their religious duties? Not so, with these ten men. Instead, it's the hated Samaritan who comes back. Jesus calls him a foreigner. The word in Greek is *allogenece*, which means stranger, outsider. Luke's writer is the only author to use the word *allogenece* in the whole of the New Testament, only in this story, this one time; perhaps to drive home for us that Jesus' merciful salvation is extended to all, especially the stranger, the outsider.

You see, Jesus yearns for us to return to him, to know of his faithful, undying love for us. So he asks, "where are you?...come back..."

Grateful for the man's return, Jesus completes the healing miracle, dismissing the man with a blessing, "stand up and go, your faith has made you well." Your faith has saved you. Your faith has rescued you from danger, has made you whole. Thank you for your belief and trust in God's kingdom present for you to dwell here and now.

We never hear from the one repentant Samaritan who chooses to take the time, and show up to give Jesus thanks for God's healing power. We don't know how his life is changed for ever. We just know that deciding to live a life of thankfulness just changes how we see things. We stop seeing ourselves and others as cast out. Instead, strangers become friends, outsiders are suddenly inside and foreigners are neighbors. Living with thankfulness, is living with blessing. So, we live with hope. We act on faith.

We're about half way through Lent. As you know, Lent is about turning back. Turning back to God to give thanks and praise for the power of his healing, cleansing, transforming presence in our lives. We call this repentance. We're not a people accustomed to turning back. We tend to be forward moving people. But, truthfully, we can't move forward if we don't first, go back and do the most obvious, the most basic, give prayerful thanks.

So, this week imagine spending time turning back in gratitude. This week, and in the weeks ahead, practice thanks. Try writing down each and every blessing. Make the list and write it down because they are numerous and we want to remember them. Then, because prayer is our central most important way to give thanks, simply say thank you to God, every day this week, by reading of your list of blessings. Let's try it, and my guess is, because we're in the practice of thankfulness, our day will just be so much better; the sun will shine brighter; we'll breath deeper and walk taller and maybe it is that worry and isolation and doubt will just look more and more like promise, and hope and faith.

Mother Teresa also said about her courageous ministry to the poor and cast out, "***We can do no great things, just small things with great love. It is not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it.***" Let's turn back to Jesus, my friends and shout out giving thanks, with great love.