

“TEN LEAPING LEPERS,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 8, 2020

This morning we have read as our scripture lesson one of my all-time favorite gospel passages. It is the story of the ten lepers. All come to Jesus to be healed. All are healed. Yet after being dispatched by Jesus to the priests of the Jerusalem Temple to be examined and certified as disease-free, nine head off, no doubt leaping with joy, with only one of them coming back to give Jesus thanks. (*Luke 17:11-19*) And in the most marvelous twist of all, the one who returns to give thanks is a Samaritan.

Today, we don't talk about Samaritans in anything but positive terms. Schooled as we are in other gospel stories, “good” and “Samaritan” go together. (*Luke 10:25-37*) But in Jesus' day the Samaritan people were a despised race because long centuries before they had broken off from the Jewish community. (*John 4:9, 8:45*) Their focus of worship was not Jerusalem but Mt. Gerizim, a mountain thirty miles north of the City of David, where they believed that Moses had received the Ten Commandments, as well the first five books of our Bible directly from God. Causing great offense to the Jews, the Samaritans completely rejected the remaining 34 books found in the Old Testament that the Jewish community considered just as holy as the first five.

Now, admittedly, the Samaritan who returned to Jesus may have had some extra motivation to appreciate him. First of all, as *both* a leper and a Samaritan he was without doubt doubly scorned by Jews. Secondly, as a Samaritan, considered to be a heretic and an infidel, he was not about to be welcomed for examination by the priests of Jerusalem's Great Temple in the company of his nine fellow lepers who were, so-to-speak, “regular” Jews. Nevertheless, the healed Samaritan does not simply wander off to do his own thing as he might have. Instead, with great thoughtfulness, he makes a point of expressing deep gratitude to Jesus. In Jesus' presence he actually kneels in the dirt to proclaim his gratitude in a loud, resolute voice. All indications are that Jesus is impressed. As Luke's Gospel records, Jesus pointedly remarks and asks: “There were ten healed. Where are the other nine? Why is this foreigner the only one who came back to give thanks to God?” (*Luke 17:17-18*) Of course, there's no happy answer. To this now-healed Samaritan, whom the rest of the the Jewish world is disposed to castigate as spiritually unworthy, Jesus then declares in the full hearing of others: “Get up and go. Your faith has made you well.” (*Luke 17:19*)

This whole gospel episode underscores that our racial and religious prejudices can often mislead us. As we know even today, some of “the best” people—or those who think they are—can be pretty fickle and shallow in the faith even when God has done wonderful things for them. Yes, even when God moves mountains for them, they can prove seriously ungrateful or forget how much they have been blessed.

This morning we may look at the nine lepers who neglected to give thanks to Jesus and insist to ourselves that we would never be in their number—that we would *never* be as thoughtless as they were. Yet is this really true? All too often we can and do take our God-given blessings for granted and then make excuses for our failure to show genuine appreciation.

In this beautiful nation with its dynamic history we do have a tendency to exalt individualism and promote the ideal of a hardy self-reliance. There's no sin in that. I have always believed that God wants us to be enterprising in the way that we put our gifts and talents to use. There's even something admirable in the philosophy which says: *Let's not expect others to do for us what we can do for ourselves.* But there is always a risk of taking our so-called "rugged individualism" too far and claiming more for it than is really true or Christian-minded. For instance, there's a line crossed when folks talk as if they're *entitled* to what they have. Or when they start insisting that everything they've got, they've *earned*—right down to the last penny or even blessing. Yes, there's a spiritual arrogance and self-centeredness in such statements which is never becoming—and certainly not befitting for any Christian.

The 16th century Christian poet John Donne said it well when he said: "No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of a continent, a part of the main... Because I am involved in humankind." (John Donne, *Meditation XVII*) That's a meditation that we all need to take to heart. What the most outspoken individualists forget is what God in the Book of Genesis proclaims: "It is not good for man to dwell alone." (*Genesis 2:18*) God has created us as social beings, inevitably inter-dependent and mutually reliant upon fellow men and women, whose help we are destined to need. Moreover, from birth onwards we are in every sense dependent upon God. God is not only the source of the personal gifts and talents that allow us to prosper. It is God's grace, hidden or obvious, that sustains us daily.

Folks, we live in a world where suffering and affliction are a reality for so many at any given time, whether in our nation or abroad. All we have to do is look around us observantly, unblinkered. It is a wise woman or man who has the humility and thankful heart to say: *There but for the grace of God go I.*

At the same time, such a realization should be for us as Christian men and women an impetus and motivation to be caring, sharing, and generous. As encouragement to this end, we are blessed to have the witness of the very prophets of ancient Israel who are not to be found in the Bible of the Samaritans but a lively presence in our own. They thundered against human egotism, greed, and idolatry—the worship of false gods—all of which they believed went hand-in-hand together.

Of course, we are even more blessed by the example of our own Savior Jesus Christ and the apostles of his church which guides us. Again and again, Jesus and his apostles emphasize for all who have ears to hear that love for God and our love for fellow men and women, tangibly expressed, are our highest moral and spiritual duty. (*Matthew 19:16-22; John 13:34; 1 John 4:7*)

Throughout the New Testament, starting with the gospels, selfishness and greed are always condemned as sinful. Indeed, Jesus' message is that worldly wealth never lasts. Wherever we're headed, heaven or hell, we can't take it with us. As Jesus explains, "Do not store up rich for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy and robbers break in and steal. Instead, store up riches yourselves in heaven where moths and rust cannot destroy and robbers cannot break in and steal. For your heart will always be where your riches are." (*Matthew 6:19-21*)

Central to the subsequent, historic teachings of Christ's Church is the concept of *stewardship*. In keeping with the spiritual truth of Jesus, faithful men and women like us are called by these very teachings to regard ourselves as *stewards* entrusted by God with our material blessings, including the natural world around us. While we chose to think that "own" our possessions, we remain as stewards morally and spiritually accountable to God in the way that we exercise such control. As the Word of God makes clear, the Creator of all expects us to remember that the blessings bestowed upon each of us are never for our own exclusive, self-serving benefit.

A poor widow whom Jesus noticed at the gates of Jerusalem's Great Temple certainly understood this. When she tossed into the Temple's coffers two small coins, Jesus commended her heartily. While others, he noted, gave out of their wealth and surplus, "she gave out of her poverty—put in everything she had to live on." (*Mark 12:44; Luke 21:4*) Some people think that they can get away with selfishness. They're even flagrant about it. They reject the whole notion of Christian stewardship and the moral responsibility that comes with wealth. But God sees. And God remembers.

As I noted last week, it's no accident that Jesus informs us that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man or woman to enter heaven. (*Matthew 19:24*) Across the annals of history, from ancient times down, there have always been a lot of rich people who don't understand the meaning of Christian stewardship. They are truly heaven-challenged. Meanwhile, there are consequences to selfishness here and now in the quality of mortal life enjoyed. The "Poor Little Rich Boy" and "Poor Little Rich Girl" syndrome is no fiction of imagination. Just look at all the kids of great wealth who bomb out of life, caught up in drug addictions, unable to sustain meaningful relationships. Great material wealth can produce great emotional and spiritual impoverishment. It can grind men and women down as much as the most dire and terrible poverty does. What kind of life do we have when it's always absorbed by calculations about the bottom

line and in competition over who's got the most and best toys? If truth be told, I don't think there's a single human being who doesn't want to be loved for who they truly and deeply are, as God made them, rather than the amount of their bank account. Unfortunately, when we turn narcissistic and greedy, we're not very lovable.

True to the spirit and example of Christ, St. Francis of Assisi proclaimed that "It is in giving that we receive." How beautifully said! Congregation, it is in our thankfulness to God and in being a blessing to others through our own caring and generosity that we will find ourselves most personally blessed and rewarded in life and death, on earth and in heaven. Jesus explains this succinctly. In the Gospel according to Luke we hear Jesus declaring: "Give to God and God will give to you. Indeed, you will receive a full measure, a generous healing, poured into your hands—all that you can hold." (*Luke 6:38*) Giving to God is about sharing in his name, affirming that we are stewards of his grace and those material blessings entrusted to us.

For us as Christians stewardship is a duty. But hopefully we can be cheerful, rather than grudging, about it. At one point the Apostle Paul was soliciting financial help from Christians in Corinth for destitute Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. He offered some advice that we should all keep in mind. "Give," he told the Corinthians, "because [you] want to; not because [you] have to." Paul then adds at more length: "God loves the one who gives gladly...And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all that you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause ... And [God] will make grow and produce a rich harvest for your generosity. He will always make you rich enough to be generous at all times, so that many will thank God for your gifts which [they] receive from us... And many will give glory to God for your loyalty to the gospel of Jesus Christ...and your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else." (*2 Corinthians 8:6-8, 11,13*) As the Apostle Paul underscores, we show our thankfulness to God for the material advantages that we enjoy by our unselfishly glad generosity to others.

When God first created the material world, he declared it "very good." (*Genesis 1:21*) To this day, our own material blessings reflect the goodness of God's creation. Yet it is always up to us to make sure that we don't let a good thing go bad by acting entitled and selfish and greedy. Going against the grain of our times, so frequently sullied by self-centeredness and thanklessness, we need to follow the example of that one-out-of-ten Samaritan who, healed of leprosy, alone came back to thank Jesus. And in our thankfulness for what God has done for us, may we each be good and generous stewards, remembering our accountability to God and his rewards for us when we are caring, giving, and sharing. Yes, God will bless us all the more when we are less selfish and more thankful and faithful with everything entrusted to us to enjoy and share. Friends, just as some folks say "You can take it to the bank," let us take this gospel word about the rewards of good stewardship right to the heart! **Amen.**