

First Presbyterian Church
“Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind: Lepers”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
March 6, 2022

Leviticus 13:45-46; Luke 17:11-19

It had been a stressful week. Two weeks ago, Cindy and I flew to St. Pete to help move my mother-in-law and her husband into assisted living. For any of you who have done this, you know that the process of uprooting people from one place, packing, unpacking, and tossing long help items is stressful. So, when we made it back to the Tampa Bay airport, I could still feel the stress. But then something happened that seemed to set me free from much of what ailed me. I was coming out of one of the stalls in the airport restroom when I saw a man all dressed in white. No, he wasn't an angel, though maybe he was, but he was the man cleaning the restroom. Upon noticing him I engaged in one of my spiritual practices; the practice of saying thank you to those who often serve unnoticed. I said, “Thank you for keeping this place clean for all of us.” I began to walk away when he replied that he seldom or ever heard anyone say thank you. I replied, he replied, and then we engaged in a short conversation about how he liked his job, but how much he appreciated knowing it made a difference. As I headed back to the gate to wait with Cindy for our flight, much of the stress from the move that I had been feeling seemed to have been lifted. What I didn't realize at the time was that what I was experiencing was the liberating power of gratitude.

To understand the healing power of gratitude we need to go to our Jesus story this morning. The story begins with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem...meaning that he knows that he is going to his death. Suddenly ten lepers approach him. This was not the usual way of things. The usual way of things was that lepers kept their distance and begged loudly for alms – for a monetary gift. Lepers needed the money because their disease kept them from working in any capacity. In fact, if we read the Leviticus text, which by the way was taken very seriously in Jesus' time, lepers had to live outside of any human contact and then had to cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” When anyone came near. It was a sad and difficult existence. Evidently Jesus' reputation preceded him, and they asked for mercy. It is not clear if they were asking to be healed or were simply asking for money. Jesus being Jesus of course, heals them of their disease. He then instructs them to go and show themselves to a priest who will declare them to be physically and thus ritually clean, meaning they can reenter society. The story could have ended there, but then the unexpected happened. One leper returned.

One of the ten lepers does not follow through on Jesus' command to go and show himself to the priests. Instead, the leper returns to give thanks to Jesus. In other words, the leper shows his gratitude and in so doing experiences the healing power of gratitude. Jesus' first reaction to this man's gratitude is to wonder out loud about the other nine. Where were they and why had they not returned to say thanks? But to this man, a foreigner, Jesus says the following words, “Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well.” What did Jesus mean by that? The man had already been cured. His leprosy had left him. What did it mean to be “made well?”

The answer can be found in understanding that the word translated as “made well” means to be liberated, to be set free. In other words, something more than physical healing took place when this man expressed his gratitude to Jesus. I would argue that what happened is that this Samaritan, who would have seen Jews like Jesus and his disciples as enemies, now saw them as friends. By thanking Jesus, a Jew, the Samaritan leper was set free, liberated from ancient prejudices and hatreds that had kept him from seeing that he was a beloved child of the God of the universe, that he was worthy of being embraced and cared for by God and God’s people. His demonstration of gratitude had allowed the fullness of God’s reconciling, healing, and life-changing power to touch his life.

Gratitude can do the same for us. In those moments when we are feeling angry, alone, down, and in despair of what is happening in the world around us; when we find our stress levels surging off the charts, gratitude can liberate us. It can set us free by turning our attention away from all that ails us and entering into God’s presence in a way that allows God’s love and grace to enter into us. This morning then, I invite you into my spiritual practice of offering gratitude. What I ask you to do is to begin by sitting comfortably. Next, place your hands in an open position, then close your eyes. With your eyes closed let your mind imagine something or someone for whom you are grateful. It might be a friend or family member in the present or the past. It might be warm water or clean air. It might be the trees, birds, or the beauty of nature. It might be anything that brings you joy. Then hold that image. Finally, give God thanks for that person, that object, that moment...and then feel God’s love washing over you. Feel God’s presence as God intones, your faith has made you well.

My challenge to you for this week is to continue this practice by continually giving thanks to God for all that you have been given.