

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

2 Kings 5: 1 – 3, 7 – 15c
 2 Timothy 2: 8 – 15

Psalm 111
 Luke 17: 11 – 19

What would make you or me whoop and holler at the top of our lungs? Having a doctor tell us that we or a loved one are free from cancer? That an anonymous benefactor had just paid off all our mortgage, car loan, credit card debts and student loans? What, if anything, would make us so darn grateful that we would fall at the feet of the messenger of that great news?

Today, we get two stories of healing that bring great joy and gratitude to the recipients of those healings. In the passage from Second Kings, we get the story of Naaman, a very powerful man. Naaman commands the King of Aram's army, and yet, he is powerless to do anything about the disease that he has. Apparently in the culture of Aram, lepers do not have to isolate themselves from all others as they do in Israel, but the effects of the disease must still be debilitating. Wisdom and knowledge come from two unsuspecting sources – his wife's slave and some of his own minions. The wife's slave lets it be known that there is someone, a man of God, a prophet, from her homeland of Israel, in the region of Samaria, who can indeed bring about the healing that Naaman desires.

When Naaman hears of this possibility, he is powerful enough that he has his King talk with Israel's King. Only the King of Israel doesn't seem to know about Elisha because Elisha is in that contentious, despised piece of land between Judea and Galilee known as Samaria. Because he doesn't know about Elisha, the King of Israel thinks it's a trick, that somehow the King of Aram is trying to pick a war with him. So he rips apart his clothes as a sign that he is quite distressed about it all. Word of this request from Aram trickles down through the ranks and it somehow reaches Elisha's ear.

Elisha, somewhat exasperated at the King's behavior, manages to tell the King to tell the other King to send Naaman to him and he, Elisha, can help him. Naaman shows up on Elisha's doorstep and Elisha prescribes a very simple ritual. So simple that it infuriates Naaman, who thinks he could have done the same thing back home and saved himself a trip. But, fortunately, one of Naaman's servants is wiser than his master and he coaxes Naaman into giving it a shot. Naaman washes in the river and is instantly healed and, by Israelite standards, ritually cleansed. Overjoyed, Naaman 'returns to the man of God' and acknowledges the power of Elisha's God. Naaman is profoundly grateful, not to Elisha, but to the power of God working in and through Elisha.

In the Gospel of Luke, we hear about a rather similar situation, except instead of someone powerful, it is a group of ten lepers, cast together as outcasts from their own communities. "When he saw them," Luke writes. Jesus takes note of these 'invisibles' – the ones that others would rather not see. The Law that keeps these people as outcasts only helps protect the rest of the society; it can do nothing to help these people. But Jesus will do what the Law cannot – Jesus heals them. The lepers have cried out for mercy, which is normally a way of asking for handouts, for alms, and yet Jesus will do them one better. He will heal them so that they will never have to beg again.

Jesus' instruction to the group of ten is as simple as Elisha's was to Naaman. Perhaps even more so. They just have to go show themselves to the priests. Leprosy is a horribly stubborn and relentlessly progressive disease, which, while it might not kill someone, it will leave them terribly disfigured and, in Jesus' time at least, with no hope of recovery. There is a common belief among Jesus' contemporaries that curing leprosy is as difficult – i.e. as impossible – as raising someone from the dead.

Jesus' words are affective, that is, they bring into being what he is saying, so that, as the ten walk away from him, presumably towards some priests somewhere, the healing happens. Surely the whooping and hollering is audible to Jesus and his followers as the formerly diseased persons find that their skin is smooth and clear once again, and perhaps even digits and other body parts restored. And yet, of the ten, only one turns back.

Luke writes, "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed..." Let those with eyes see and let those with ears hear. Just like Jesus saw, took note, of the group of ten, so, too, this one man sees his healing, and he realizes how (or perhaps through whom) this has happened. Which is more surprising, that in the midst of their jubilation, only one turns back to express gratitude? Or that the other nine don't?

The one man runs back to Jesus, praising God all the way, and falling, in humility, at Jesus' feet. Like the story of Naaman and Elisha, that man gives praise to God, recognizing that God has worked through the man standing in front of him. And like Naaman, this man is a foreigner. This leper is one of the dreaded Samaritans. Notice that Jesus tells the man, "Get up! Your faith has made you well!" The Greek word that Luke uses for "get up" is a word that early Christians would have associated with resurrection. So yes, curing a leper is rather like raising the dead. And like the son who returns in the story of the Prodigal Father, this one leper was essentially dead, but now this man is alive again.

This Samaritan has outdone his Jewish companions in that he has returned to praise and express gratitude to God. Interestingly, "Jew" is derived from Judea, and before that from the tribe and person of Judah, and Judah means praise. The Samaritan has praised God when the Jews have not. But why, when we look at the story, are the other nine blamed for following the instructions given to them? Why *does* the Samaritan come back? And why, considering that all of them are "made clean," does Jesus tell this one man that his faith has "made him well?"

Perhaps the other nine simply continue on in their ecstatic joy to do exactly what they have been told to do and they praise God when they get there. Perhaps since the Samaritans live out their faith differently than the Jews, this man has a different kind of relationship with his priest, or he may not be under any obligation to complete some ritual of purification. And maybe Jesus would say the same thing to the others if he could, but we only know that Jesus has post-healing contact with this one. In saying that the man's faith has made him well, perhaps Jesus is saying that this man has received even more than he asked for. Rather than just being cleansed, there is a wholeness, a wellness, a shalom, about him.

Seventeenth century English priest, William Law, among many other things he had to say about gratitude, wrote that "the greatest saint is not the person who prays the most; it is the one who is the most thankful." The point of both of the stories we hear today is not so much the healing that takes place, but rather the response to that healing: the thankfulness, the gratitude, to the source of the healing, God. In both cases, faith is expressed as gratitude and praise. Neither Naaman or the unnamed leper simply celebrate their good fortune; they both recognize God at work. It's been said that gratitude is perhaps the purest measure of one's character and spiritual condition. Not being able to be grateful indicates a self-centeredness, an attitude that one deserves more than what one has received, so there's not a need to be grateful.

We are challenged by both of these stories to see gratitude as a full expression of our faith. Not so much as a follow-on to faith, but rather faith itself emanating from the gratitude. True gratitude, coming from the heart, is shot through with humility of spirit. It reveals an abiding awareness of God's grace in the midst of each moment of life. Is there a more perfect response than wonder and thanksgiving to the unmerited grace and mercy and kindness we receive, not only from God, but from our fellow human beings? None of us is self-made. None of us is where we are in life without the help of God and others. Each day is infused with blessings, many of which we don't see, many of which we can never repay, and many for which – if noticed – we don't ever pause to give thanks.

Our expression of gratitude – or not – is a barometer of our spiritual health. It is a direct measure of our awareness and acknowledgment of God's presence. Which makes each encounter, each action, each gift, an opportunity to respond with praise to God.

In the spirit of interactive sermons recently, here are some ways for us to respond during this service and beyond:

- 1) handout about leprosy in the world today from WHO (pray);
 - 2) an invitation to come light a votive candle with a prayer of gratitude;
 - 3) come up for healing or to lay on hands after communion;
 - 4) 30-day challenge (29 days through All Saints Sunday); or
 - 5) pocket slips of paper with quotations about gratitude.
- +