

“Praying for Goodness”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, October 9, 2016
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1,4-7 and Luke 17:11-19

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. It said: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give you daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Luke 17:11-19

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power and working of your Holy Spirit. I pray that the words and images that we carry within, the words we have offered in song and in prayer, the words we have heard read from sacred scripture and words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share would be touched, blessed and transformed by your Spirit so that it would become the living word of Jesus Christ. And that that word would give us life, would nurture and sustain us in this life, would guide us into right action and right words and would be our comfort and strength throughout all that we face. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

They say that biblical exposition and interpretation is contextual. That sometimes the context of what we are doing when we come to scripture shapes and colors it much like a stained

glass window will take a ray of sun and turn it into something beautiful or different or intriguing. This week, earlier, I spent time re-seeding my front yard. This is the context in which I came to this Bible passage about ten lepers that are cleaned by calling out to Jesus and turning to go to the temple as he commanded them and then one of them, as he is going, realizes what God had done for him and he steps out of the ten and he turns around and he comes back and finds Christ, offering God praise and saying, "thank you". That's what this one person did. In the flow of life, he realized that God was at work doing something phenomenal for him, restoring him, saving him, healing him, and in that recognition, he turns and comes back laying aside all the things that he is supposed to do and he simply says, "thank you" to Christ and offers praises to God.

This passage is resonating with me as I go about my business, throwing around seed on empty spots. I had done that before. I put grass seed in all the empty spots, I watered it profusely and I watched birds show up and eat grass seed and I had empty spots afterwards. I called my father who owned a florist and greenhouses and I said "What's my problem?" And he said, "After you cast the seed and water it, you need to cover it." "What should I cover it with?" "Dirt and fertilizer." Hmmmm. So I fill in all the seed, I water it and I have this nice mixture of dirt and organic fertilizer. Can you smell it yet? And I cover the seed again and I water it. Now this is probably the third or fourth time that we have re-seeded the yard, because apparently it doesn't work the first three times, always. But the exciting thing is when it does work, one morning I'll walk out and in the sea of brown from peat moss and fertilizer and dirt, will be a tiny shoot of green grass. And I think to myself, *wow. That's amazing. That seed got watered and it cracked open and a little tiny piece of grass has stuck its head out from all the dirt and organic fertilizer that was there to cover it.*

Now I don't know if you have figured out where I'm going yet, but there has been a lot of dirt and organic fertilizer floating around in our culture in the last week or so. (Can a preacher get an 'amen' on that? I know we are Presbyterian, but every now and then.....) We watched millions of people leave the coast of Florida, North Carolina, all that were affected. Highways that went both ways are now going one way, car after car, people getting out of the way. Ocean waves crashing into condos. Trees bent over. Millions of people displaced. I learned at Thursday night Bible study that a police officer was killed here in St. Louis in South County, making a call, doing his job. And his life was ended.

And then for the fertilizer part. Apparently at Washington University tonight there is going to be a debate. Have you heard about that? Just when I thought the political discourse of our country couldn't descend any lower, it's done it again. And as your preacher and your pastor, what I want to do is take all of you to some quiet, secluded place, without a television, or a newspaper. I want to light candles and have us fall on our knees and simply pray. I want us to be below all of the stuff that's going on. And as I was thinking about that seeding and watching the thing grow, I realized that there is an opportunity for us in this image of planting in the midst of dirt and fertilizer and then growing up through it, that we can be both grounded in the promises of God, living in the midst of dirt and organic fertilizer and rising up above it and through it, in order to be who and what God has made us to be. In a sense I see that paralleled in this gospel story, ten persons who were disfigured and disqualified from being part of their families or their community or their faith traditions, they were set aside because of how they looked and what was happening to them. And Jesus came and saw them and healed all of them, not just the one. All of them grew up through the stuff of life to be what God had intended them to be and one of them recognized what was happening and turned and said, "thank you".

The invitation for us is to have those moments of recognition in our own lives when we are wondering if God is still at work, when we are wondering if we've been included or forgotten, when we are wondering and worrying, we need to remember that God is doing what God has always done and will always do. God is saving us. God is redeeming us and God is restoring us to wholeness. I tell you it does not look like it if you look around. That is what God is up to, underneath the surface of our culture and sometimes through it.

How is God at work among us? You just saw three examples of how God is at work among us when Craig Wilde was telling you about these homeless outreach programs that the church is starting to be involved in. It seems ridiculous at some level to us as Presbyterians, that the ministry of Jesus Christ could be as simple as making a casserole and bringing it to a church. We are civilized people, we are educated people. A casserole, really? And yet that is how God is at work among us. One shoot growing up through the stuff of life in order that people who are hungry may be fed. A grocery card to Schnucks--\$20. Again, \$20. And the hand of God is at work in that \$20. Providing for those who are homeless, who are trying to get their lives back together, who need our help, who need us, like Christ, to see them when they call out and ask for help and assistance. Will we have the eyes of Christ, and will we spend \$20 to embody the love of Christ to another. Hats, gloves, socks. Again it seems too simple. Yet when we go online or we go and buy these items and make them available, we are helping our neighbors in need. We are the salvation or restoration or wholeness of God being brought into the lives of our neighbors in the city who need us to pay attention and to see them and to recognize what God is up to and to act—not out of a sense of desperation but out of a sense of thanksgiving and joy, a recognition of how God has blessed us and now we get to bless another.

In the time of the writing of the Gospel, the disease of leprosy was a sure way for those who had it to be excluded from everything. They were unclean, unfit, they needed to stay together and they needed to not be involved in anything that had anything to do with normal life. They were outcasts, outsiders. When they called to Christ, they said simply, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” That's what's recorded. But I have wondered this week, is there more that they would want to say? And as I was wondering that, I remembered an email that I got from Dr. Blanchard in the aftermath of the death of a congregant who passed away at the end of August. Her name was Shanus Robinson. You may remember her. She had long brown hair and she wore glasses and she walked kind of slowly. And she had bumps everywhere all over her body. After she passed away her father sent this poem that she had written to Karen as an affirmation of Karen's ministry at the time of her passing. And I share it with you in the spirit of what this one or the ten may have thought and may have cried out besides “Lord Jesus, have mercy”. Here is the poem.

People look at me but don't see me.
My disability does not define me.
I may look different, I may walk with a limp
but my disability does not define me.
I may take longer to understand things, I may have problems catching on,
but my disability does not define me.
I have feelings like everyone else. I laugh, I cry, I joke around,
but my disability does not define me.
I am likable, I am lovable. Give me a chance,
because my disability does not define me.

I read this poem and feel somewhat convicted because of what I do to others when I look at them. I define them by their outward appearances. Instead, what Shamus and the leper remind all of us to do is to look within, to look beyond, to see with the eyes of Christ, a human being in need in front of us, who is likable, who is lovable and who simply wants a chance. Amen.