

Rev. Dr. Craig Howard

“Thank You, Lord”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, October 13, 2019

### **Jeremiah 29:1-7**

*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. This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of 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 your 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.*

### **Luke 17:11-19**

*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.’*

So while on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus finds himself in the midst of people who are physically sick with a skin condition. This colony of outcasts are living outside of the populated areas of Jerusalem. It isn't that they don't want to be part of the vibrant and bustling city. It isn't that they don't want to be a part of the politics and the worshipping community. These lepers are outside of the city because they have been rejected, and they are not welcome in the temple or in the city limits. Now, geographically, if Jesus were going to Jerusalem, he would not travel through the area between Samaria and Galilee. He would have to go completely out of his way in order to do this. Now, perhaps Jesus did make an unlikely turn to the north and then double back down. Or it could be that Luke just doesn't know the geography. Or it could be something else. It could be something theological that's going on here. You see, theologically, there could be a place that is in between or a region that is neither here nor there. And living in such a region would be those who are outcasts. Those who are both physically and spiritually in no man's land. Those who do not fit in church and are rejected by society. Those who are physically, emotionally, and religiously unclean. And this is where Jesus finds himself. Jesus is in the midst of them. And once again, Jesus is not found in the quarters of power or in the halls of the temple. Jesus is in the midst of the rejected and the unwanted. Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick do." And it's in the midst of the sick, in the midst of the broken, that's where we find Jesus.

The Bible says that the lepers approached Jesus. Then keeping their distance, they cried out to him. Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices. Often people who have the most need are afraid to approach the places where help should come from. These are people who are turned out and turned away from institutions that can help them. These are people who may be afraid to knock on the door of big and beautiful stone churches. They keep their distance and they yell from that distance. They keep their distance and cry out for help. The lepers cry out to Jesus for mercy and what does Jesus do? The Bible says Jesus made them clean. The text doesn't say he healed them, although that is implied, Jesus made them clean. What Jesus does is remove the barrier that caused them to be outcasts. See, according to the book of Leviticus, that's in the Old Testament, if a person has a skin disease, the priest can say to that person that they are unclean and that person is not allowed in the temple--not allowed in the temple. This means that they are not allowed to be in the fellowship with their friends. They are not allowed to have communion with their neighbors. They're not allowed to take part in the festivals and celebrations and, most of all, they are not allowed into the presence of God. These people cannot confess their sins. And they cannot be forgiven. They must live

outside of the social order and structure. It is a form of social and spiritual isolation.

And so here comes Jesus. And he does what society will not do. Jesus has mercy. Jesus does what the temple will not do. Jesus has mercy. Jesus does what the priest cannot do. Jesus cleanses them and then tells them to go back into the temple and show the priest that they are healed. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." During stewardship season, we often talk about living in God's abundance and removing the fear of scarcity. We talk about all the ways that God has been good to us. But perhaps the problem isn't a presence of abundance, but having access to that abundance. These lepers could not have access to God's abundance because of their illness. This is why Jesus healed them. Jesus removed the hindrances of barriers of abundance towards-- so they could have abundant life.

There are many people in our area, in Saint Louis and the metro area, in our presbytery and communities that lack access to abundance. It could be because of their zip code or it could be because of a poor and inferior education. It could be because of a lack of healthcare or basic nutrition so that they can even, as children, be able to learn, and perhaps the church is challenged to be the hands of God, and the hands of Jesus, and remove these barriers that keep people from accessing the abundance that is all around us. So as the lepers go, one of them looks and sees that he is no longer damaged, the blotches are gone, the sores have healed. He realizes what has happened, and his eyes are open, and he sees Jesus for who Jesus really is, the Messiah, the anointed of God. And so he turns back and as a response, he goes before Jesus, and he puts his face down, and he worships him, giving thanks to God for what has happened. This person's eyes have been open to what has happened in his life and he gives thanks to God. I could spend the next five minutes or so talking about the other nine who did not return. Now I find great humor in a fact that Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priests, and then Jesus goes, "Where'd they go? Where'd they go?" I can imagine that some of them think that showing themselves to the priest, the very institution that has rejected them, the very place that created this hardship in their lives, they find such a suggestion, incredulous, and simply don't do it. You see sometimes, instead of being a place of healing, the church can be a place of hurt. Instead of being a place of grace and hospitality, the church can be a place of rejection.

Yesterday I was down in Sullivan, at old Argo church, one of our churches, and they have this fall festival when they make this homemade apple butter, and I just had to have this experience. I was leaving an installation service at Trinity PC in U City, and I was dressed still in my sport coat and slacks, and I'm looking like a good old city guy. And I go down to the old Argo festival and everybody's in jeans, and what do you call those things? Overalls! And I'm the only one like me there, if you know what I mean. And here I am, now I got on a sport coat and pants, and I'm really really sticking out, and I'm really concerned, and I go to the pastor and the people are sitting at tables and I said, "Is there a place I should sit?" My message with him was, is there someplace I could sit where I could feel welcome. He said, Craig, just sit anywhere, sit anywhere." So I went and I sat across from this older couple, and we began to talk, and they let me know they were not even from that church, that this is a community event. And they welcomed me. Everywhere I turned, they welcomed me. I went to get my pie, they welcomed me. I must admit to you, when I walked in the door and saw the situation I didn't know if I would fit. But when I left I felt a warm hospitality and grace that made me once again have hope in the church.

We can be that place of grace and welcome. As members of the body of Christ, it is our calling to break down walls of separation and barriers, walls that separate us because of the color of our skin, our voice, or the size of our wallet or because of who we choose to love. We are called as a church to remove barriers that prevent people from having access to God's abundance. But I really want to talk about that one that came back. This is the one Jesus calls a foreigner because he was a Samaritan. Samaritans are distant cousins from Jews but if you know anything about Jewish history, you know they're not kissing cousins. The Jews don't dig the Samaritans, okay? And so, Jesus sees this one comes back and and he comes back because this person's eyes are wide open, they see that they are cleansed, they see that they are healed. And now that their eyes are open, they can see things around them to give thanks to God for what we see, what we focus on, what we give our attention to really matters. God is breaking in all around us in our lives. Can't you see it? God is breaking in like the light through the stained glasses in our lives, at our homes, on our jobs, in our garden, wherever we are, there is God. Do you see it? What we are really challenged to see is one another.

When was the last time you really looked your neighbor in the face? Even when you came to church today, you sat down next to someone and you didn't know who they are, but when was the last time you actually looked at them? Look them in the face. The other day I was walking down the sidewalk coming back from lunch and a crowd of folks walking along and unbeknownst to us, there was this homeless dude on the sidewalk begging. And I stepped, stepped right over him, I don't see a thing, I'm going right along my way. Because I knew if I stopped and I looked, and I saw him, he would become real. He would become real and I

would see him into existence. If I stopped, and if I looked at him, I would have to face the fact that this is a person that this too is God's creation, that this too is a person that deserves dignity and respect, and I don't have time for that. I've got to get back to work. Stepped right over someone else that was headed back to the offices. When this leper returns, when this worshipping person returns, Jesus says, "His faith has made him whole." The leper moves-- he moves from being unclean, to clean and from being sick to being healed, and now through giving thanks he moves from being broken to being made whole. Perhaps what God is challenging us to do is to see one another. And by seeing one another, we can bring wholeness, we can bring healing to one another.

And another thing I believe God is challenging us to do is to tell the story, our story to others, to give testimony. I don't know if Al's here. I think Al has been kind of sick. But Al's always saying to me, "Reverend Howard, we got to talk about evangelism." I'd be like, "Oh, evangelism, that cursed word." When I was worshipping in the Pentecostal Church, we would have a testimony service. This was a time when people would stand and simply thank God for what God has done in their lives. They would thank God for giving them safety over the highways. They would thank God for protecting them as they walk down the dangerous streets of Chicago. They would thank God for giving them healing and their bodies' or clarity in their mind. They would thank God for allowing the kids to grow up and to leave home. And they would thank God for sometimes when some children came back home and although we do not have this practice in our churches, there is still something that we can do. We can have a testimony service in our hearts.

We can thank God for what God has done for us, and we can thank God in our hearts. We can worship God in song, and we can worship God in prayer, and we can worship God in giving. And this is our way of having our internal testimony. Perhaps our text is showing us that worship It's not just about hearing about the mighty works of God, it's not just about hearing about the miracles of Jesus and praising God in response, but worship is about helping us to see, to see God at work in the world, and see God in the faces of others in our lives. And perhaps this is what it means to be a Christian, to be a child of the kingdom. We're called simply to see and to help others to do the same. We're called to remove barriers, to point out the blessings, to claim mercy and to name grace, wherever we are. Amen.