

PENTECOST XX

'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well. ' Luke 17: 19

Here's a saying of Jesus' that has done as much harm as good. Some of us have given joyful thanks to God after recovering from an illness or an accident – or from narrowly escaping one. The good news that a cyst is benign. The car that ran a red light but just missed broad siding you. We all know the rush of adrenalin, relief, and thankfulness that accompanies such moments.

Just as many have not recovered, have not dodged the bullet of malignancy or catastrophe. Just as many have felt fear, despair, anguish and grief at bad news or bad luck.

In fact, most of us have probably had both kinds of experience. Get to a certain time in life, and we probably haven't escaped either.

Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well. Where the harm comes in is when we think of faith as being about cause and effect. Thinking that if you pray for something and it comes about, prayer has made it happen. And that if we don't get our heart's desire, our prayers have not been answered, or the answer is *no*.

In this passage from Luke, Jesus heals ten lepers in the region between Galilee and Samaria. A dangerous region. Samaritans and Jews are hostile to one another; Samaritans are Gentiles, thought to be unclean even if they don't have leprosy.

We can hardly underestimate the dire circumstances of these ten. Outcast, alienated, dreaded. *Leprosy* at Jesus' time meant any skin blemish or sore that looked suspicious, and the condition was thought to be radically contagious. Lepers were pariahs.

We aren't told whether all of them are Samaritans – that would be double jeopardy in the eyes of Jesus' followers and indeed, Jesus' whole society. But he heals them all, without thought to their tribal identity.

Then he tells them to go show themselves to the priests– their religious authorities, who will certify to their new cleanliness. Nine of them go skipping off to get the priestly seal of approval. One of them, definitely a Samaritan, turns around, falls on his knees, and gives thanks to Jesus. Jesus says to him, and to him alone

Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.

Take a look at this morning's bulletin cover – Emily always finds brilliant graphics. We see nine heads all smooshed together looking in one direction, and one, singular, facing the other way. That one is the one who distinguished himself from the crowd, who turned around, and instead of rushing heedlessly away to celebrate his good fortune, stopped to give thanks to his benefactor.

The healing itself is low key. We aren't told what Jesus does or how he does it. The *gratitude* is what gets the attention: Jesus' attention, our attention. And that may be the point, that may be the healing: not the clear skin, but the thanksgiving.

There's a website called *Web MD: Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude*. On it, I read the following researched-based comments

Grateful people -- those who perceive gratitude as a permanent trait rather than a temporary state of mind -- have an edge on the not-so-grateful when it comes to health. "Grateful people take better care of themselves and engage in more protective health behaviors like regular exercise, a healthy diet, regular physical examinations." (Prof Robert Emmons, UC Davis).

And also this

Even in the face of tremendous loss or tragedy, it's possible to feel gratitude. In fact, adversity can boost gratitude, recent findings show. In a web-based survey tracking the personal strengths of more than 3,000 American respondents, researchers noted an immediate surge in feelings of gratitude after Sept. 11, 2001.

Why would such a tragic event provoke gratitude, and what is its impact? (The psychologist) who posted the survey, attributes this surge in gratitude among Americans post 9/11 to a sense of increased belonging. These feelings offered more than community building. Gratitude in the aftermath of 9/11 helped buffer people against the negative effects of stress, making them less likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

So, from Luke writing in the late first century to the internet and medical research 2010 – similar outcomes reported, similar conclusions.

I said a few minutes ago that the healing might reside not so much in the physical cure, but in the thanksgiving. Certainly, I believe, the faith resides in the thanksgiving, and the thanksgiving in the faith. To Jesus, to Luke, to the Samaritan, thanksgiving and faith are indistinguishable.

I talk and write frequently about *faith and practice*. But I realize that what I really mean by that is the *practice of faith*. Practice is not just our liturgy, or our church polity, practice is what we do to live out our faith. It is the *purpose of our faith*.

As I said last week, Jesus tells the disciples. it's not, *how much faith is enough?* But *what is faith for?* He tells the disciples they have the faith they need. Now they must fulfill its purpose by living it.

And just so, thanksgiving. Just so, gratitude. We may be gifted, we may be blessed, with a disposition to gratitude. But that disposition is not served well, God is not served well if we don't practice our gift. And if gratitude doesn't come to us naturally, instinctively, we can practice it. We can be mindful of our many blessings. We can school ourselves to thankfulness and praise. And such practice, I can almost guarantee, will heal us, will make us more whole.

If you don't believe me, think of folks you know who seem to you to be sound, to be emotionally and psychologically and spiritually healthy. Are they the grippers and nit-pickers and perpetual victims of the world? Not so much, I'll bet.

The people who bring light into our lives and into our communities tend to be those who appear glad to be alive, aware of their good fortune, appreciative, and thankful, often for the smallest of favors or blessings. These are folk who, intentionally or instinctively, practice gratitude.

And they tend not to be folk who expect some all-powerful God to micromanage their lives and spare them the vicissitudes of the human condition. They tend to be folk who don't blame God for their misfortunes, and who view their blessings as just that – blessings, gifts.

I was particularly intrigued by *Web MD*'s attribution of an increased sense of gratitude after 9.11 to an increased sense of belonging. So many of you speak of your thankfulness at having found the community here at St. John's, your gratitude for the community we are.

Today is the 18th anniversary of my time here at St. John's. Not a round number, but still, an anniversary. And I can't finish a sermon about health and gratitude without telling how everlastingly thankful I am to have spent, and be spending, the majority of my ordained ministry in this blessed place, this loving and beloved community.

And I can't begin to enumerate the ways in which I am grateful. I hardly know how to begin. I will just say a couple of things. The principal one is this: there's nowhere

else I want to be, or have ever wanted to be in the last 18 years. I have no envy of any of my colleagues anywhere in the church. There have been unhappy times when I was sorely tempted just to quit –that’s the truth–not because I wanted to be elsewhere, rather, because in certain times of trial I wasn’t sure I could continue here.

I know we have problems: problems of congregational turnover because we are an urban parish, problems with an endangered physical plant, problems with money. But, my dear friends, these are not worst problems, these are not the problems that destroy a community.

No, what destroys community is lack of kindness, lack of generosity, lack of common purpose, lack of vision. And we have those gifts in abundance. We have energy, we have humor – praise Jesus. We share these saving graces – and believe me, they are graces, gifts from God, and they are saving gifts.

The other thing I will say is that this ministry has formed and shaped me in ways for which I will be ever grateful. I tell everyone I counsel in the ordination process that our “formation” as priests does not end with the laying on of hands. In many ways, it begins then. Formation is a lifelong process, and so much of mine has occurred within these walls.

Here I have learned so much about faithfulness. So much about gratitude. Here, I have been made so much more whole. As, I pray, have we all. And as we continue to do, daily, weekly, year in and year out.

How do we practice that gratitude, my dear friends?

Because we are promised that our gratitude will heal us *all*, will make us *all* whole.

Alleluia! Amen