

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
October 13, 2013

Luke 17:11-19
"Gratitude"

One aspect of a seminary internship experience at Redwoods is the reading of a book or publication by-and-large chosen by the pastor with the concurrence of the intern.

Faith and I read a book on moral issues, which integrated pretty well with the Tuesday morning Bible Study she was facilitating at the time, and it was a good way to discuss the many ethical issues ministers face in ministry.

One of my favorite stories is mentoring an intern in a San Francisco church. He had been a computer tech support person – a geek – with a strong technical background. I discerned that it would be valuable for him to reflect on pastoral ministry in an artistic manner. I found an excellent book that integrated poetry and pastoral care.

Stephanie and I are reading the magazine "Christian Century" together which offers a wide range of subjects in the contemporary field. The magazine's motto is, "Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully."

One of the columns is called "Living by the Word – Reflections on the Lectionary." Up-coming lectionary passages like the biblical texts today are reflected upon by scholars around the country. The scriptures discussed for today were the two other passages in the lectionary and not the ones I chose. Each Sunday pastors can choose to preach from four biblical passages if they preach from the lectionary.

I found a back copy that addressed my gospel text, an article written by a United Methodist Church pastor in Worthington, Ohio, Barbara Sholis, on October 5, 2004. I found her reflections so worthwhile that I wanted her to tell her story today. I shall add items along the way and end the sermon with another story and a comment.

Barbara writes: "There are moments when you just know what's coming next. No one has to confirm it for you; the feeling in your gut is confirmation enough. After I lay on the ultrasound table for two minutes, the technician left me alone while she went to find the radiologist. I knew I was in trouble. No one had biopsied anything. No one had uttered the word 'cancer,' much less 'lobular invasive carcinoma,' but I knew. Four days and seven biopsies later, the surgeon's words, 'Barbara, you do have breast cancer,' drifted through the phone receiver to me. But the news was redundant.

'As the next day dawned, the idea of cancer began to sink in. I cried as I got out of bed. I cried in the shower. I cried putting on my makeup. I cried driving to work. I sat at my desk and couldn't stop the flow of tears. I could only see the word 'cancer' staring back from the computer screen.

"While I sat there, paralyzed with fear, a colleague knocked lightly on my door: 'Hey Barb, Dr. Stone is in the library.' A busy doctor stopping by on a Friday morning to return a book to the church library -- how often does that happen? Although she is not my doctor, I pulled her into my office as if I'd been thrown a life preserver. Reaching out with compassion, she brought Christ the Healer to me.

"The next week, I spent time with my spiritual director. As shock muffled my ability to experience God's abiding presence with me, my director invited me to open myself to discover all the ways God was reassuring me that I was not walking this journey by myself. Driving home, I formed this prayer for guidance: 'Seek God, see God, choose life.'

"When chemotherapy causes your hair to fall out, robs you of your energy and fills your mouth with canker sores, you begin to develop empathy with the ten lepers. There is no hiding the fact that you are diseased. Your cancer walks into the room before you do and people who know better still flinch -- as they did before lepers, who were made to live outside the community, who had to beg for survival.

"But Jesus, approaching the village, sees the lepers and doesn't flinch; he shows compassion. While most walk by and choose to look away, Jesus chooses to see their misery and hear their calls for healing. As was the religious practice, he sends them to the priests. Luke tells us: 'And as they went, they were made clean.'

"Can you imagine experiencing a miraculous healing? I am sure the lepers were speechless, overwhelmed with the shock of disbelief at their good fortune. One moment they were living a dreadful, diseased, quarantined existence, and then, in the time it took to walk to the village priest, their skin healed, their vision cleared, their sores dried up."

My interpretation of this was that Jesus saw what the lepers had not seen due to their negative self-concept of calling themselves "unclean, unclean." They were clean somehow but did not see that they were. Jesus saw it and instructed them to go the priest. It was on the way that the lepers in fact saw that they were clean.

"The local priest sounded the 'all clear,' freeing them to return to society, to their homes, to a productive life," writes Barbara. "If you think about your own

probable reaction, it is hard to blame the lepers for scattering to the wind and leaving the past behind them like a bad dream.

“But Luke tells us that one leper, the Samaritan, the foreigner, upon seeing before his eyes the miraculous healing of his body, is overcome with gratitude. He turns back to thank Jesus. We know from his loud voice, his falling flat on his face at the Master’s feet, that even his body cannot contain his praise and thanksgiving.

“This miracle story reminds me of Helen Keller’s memory of the miracle in her life. (For those who forget the details as I do, Helen Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama in 1880 with the ability to see and hear. At 19 months old, she contracted an illness described by doctors as ‘an acute congestion of the stomach and the brain’, which might have been scarlet fever or meningitis. The illness left her both deaf and blind. She was the first deaf blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree and was a prolific author, political activist and lecturer. She died in Easton, Connecticut in 1968 at age 87. In 1990, she was listed in Gallup’s Most Widely Admired People of the 20th Century.)

“‘Suddenly,’ Keller writes, ‘I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten -- a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could, in time, be swept away. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. . . . Every object that I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me.’

“It has been said that gratitude may be the purest measure of one’s character and spiritual condition. ‘Seek God, see God, choose life.’ The prayer continues to serve me well,” writes Barbara. “It reminds me that I, too, see everything with strange, new sight. Like the tenth leper, I never want to lose sight of the miracle of God’s grace.

“Being grateful as I awaken to the gift of each day is the key. Alan Culpepper writes, “Are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay and for which we often fail to be grateful? Here is a barometer of spiritual health: although gratitude is not synonymous with faith, neither response to God can be separated from the other.”

“The tenth leper’s faithful, untainted gratitude for God’s mercy is humbling to see. He realizes that life is a gift, that ‘just to get up each day is windfall’ (John Claypool). Life can make you feel as if you have lead in your shoes. It can leave you lost, wandering and wondering. But gratitude brings buoyancy. It is the

antidote for fear. Gratitude flips despair on its back and says, 'You're not robbing me of today!'"

One of my favorite theologians Dorothee Soelle writes in her book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, that there's a French Marian legend about a storyteller who gives up his fickle life and enters a monastery. But the life of the monks remains strange to him; he knows neither how to recite or chant a prayer. He pours out his lament to the Virgin Mary and she tells him to serve God with what he can do, namely to dance and leap. From that moment on, he skips the divine offices and dances during those times. He is called to the abbot and believes that he is about to be expelled. But the abbot only says, "With your dancing you have glorified God with body and soul. But may God forgive us all those lofty words that pass our lips without coming from the heart."

It is said that the Samaritan leper's return to Jesus was more a heart than a head response. His head would have followed the instructions as the others did and there's no judgment of their path. The fuller faith response seemed that of the tenth leper who immediately responded with thankfulness, gratitude and praise of God. The requirements of the law could wait.

In all things, we thank and praise God first and then we fulfill our duties as Christians. Our gratitude will positively affect everything we do. How do we follow our heart? What are we grateful for today? If you find it then lose it in thankfulness and praise. Allow yourself the glorious expressions of the heart. Allow yourself to dance or whatever to express your heart in gratitude and praise. Know that when you do Jesus himself addresses you. He says, as he did with the tenth leper: "...go on your way, your faith has made you well." Amen.