

Sunday, October 13, 2019
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 23 (Year C)
Luke 17.11-19
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

What does it mean to live a life of faith? Not just to have faith, but to actually live out of that faith?

Today's Gospel reading gives us some insight into what living a life of faith truly means. We hear the story of ten lepers coming to Jesus, imploring him to have mercy on them. Just to be clear, when the Bible talks about people suffering from leprosy, it does not necessarily mean that they have Hansen's Disease—what we commonly call leprosy. In the Bible, leprosy is used as a generic term for a number of forms of skin disease. According to Jewish law, anyone with so called "leprosy" was thought to be contagious and was considered ritually unclean. They were required by law to stay away from others, including their own family and friends. And because of being considered unclean, they were not allowed to participate in Temple worship and the rituals that were central to their faith. Because religion was so central to Jewish society, to not be able to practice their faith would have meant that these men stood completely outside the community. They were *persona non grata*—alone, abandoned by society, and by their faith community. It is out of a sense of desperation—desperation not only to be healed, but also to be able to return to their community and to Temple worship—that the ten dare to approach Jesus. They have faith that he will be able to heal them.

To be sure, their faith is well-placed and certainly pays off. Jesus does have mercy on them. Without any fanfare or wild display of power, Jesus merely says to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests" (Lk 17.14a). In other words, he is telling them that they are to take the necessary steps under Jewish law to be declared physically healed and therefore ritually clean. A determination that was made not by doctors, but by the religious authorities. Only on the determination by the priests would they be allowed to return to their community, to their family and friends. Only then would they be allowed to return to their faith community and be able to participate in the ritual practices of their faith.

In following Jesus' command, the ten show faith. They trust that even as they turn and walk away, still having leprosy, that somehow, somewhere along the line before they get to the priest, they will have been healed. And sure enough, we are told that "as they went, they were made clean" (Lk 17.14b). Ten lepers, living a life of faith. Ten lepers, healed because of their faith in Jesus.

But wait, there's more. There's more to the story, and therefore, more to what it means to live in faith. To living out of our faith. Luke tells us: "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" (Lk 17.15-16a). Jesus observes that the man who returned is the only one of the ten who does so. The only one who returns to express gratitude for the healing that he has received. We don't quite know what to make of Jesus' response. His words could be taken in a number of ways, but since we cannot detect tone from written text, we cannot be certain.

Maybe he was angry that only one bothered to express gratitude. Maybe he was upset. Maybe he was hurt. Maybe he was dismayed. Maybe he was sad. Maybe a little of each of these. But Jesus is able to push that all aside and focus on the foreigner who knelt before him, offering profound gratitude for his healing and for all that went with it—for being able to return to his family, to his community, to his own religious practices. To this, Jesus responds, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well” (Lk 17.19).

Jesus’ final words to the Samaritan might be a little lost on us. It kind of implies that the man was healed because of his faith, not necessarily because of anything that Jesus did. But as in so many instances of dealing with ancient texts originally written in other languages, it’s kind of lost in translation. The Greek word that is translated as “made well” certainly carries with it a sense of being healed. But that word can also be translated as “saved”—of being saved from mortal danger. That same word can also be translated as “made whole”—of being made complete, of being made who you were meant to be. (David Lose, “...In the Meantime,” Pentecost 18C, <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/10/pentecost-18-c-the-secret/>).

This one leper—former leper—stands apart from his nine comrades. Yes, all of them were healed and made ritually clean because they had faith in Jesus. But only the Samaritan is saved. Only he is truly made whole. All because he gave thanks. And in giving thanks, he lived into the fullness of who God created him to be. He lived into the fullness of what it means to have faith. Perhaps this is why Jesus had the reaction that he did when the man first returned. That the other nine, in failing to recognize the source of their healing, and particularly in failing to express gratitude, were failing to live into the fullness of their faith, into the fullness of who God created them to be.

In proclaiming the Samaritan as not only healed, but also as being saved and made whole, all because of his simple act of returning to express gratitude, Jesus is reminding us that gratitude is a central component of faith. Gratitude is a central component of living a life of faith.

Admittedly, this story centers on an expression of gratitude in response to prayers answered, in response to mercy extended, in response to healing received. But the unspoken message that Jesus conveys is a reminder that living out of faith is more than transactional—more than being faithful because we receive what we ask for. Or being faithful in hopes of getting what we ask for. Sadly, it is not uncommon for people to lose their faith when they do not get what they pray for. It is not uncommon for people to lose their faith when something bad happens to them or a loved one.

But the point of today’s Gospel reading is that living out of faith means remaining faithful to God at all times, in all things. Even when we do not get our way. Still trusting that God is there for us. Living out our faith means being grateful in all things. In all things and in all circumstances. Admittedly, giving thanks when we get what we want, when things are going well for us, is easy. Giving thanks in the midst of difficulties is more challenging. But doing so is truly a sign of faith. Trusting that God is there, even in the midst of hardship. That God is lifting us up, even in the midst of difficulties. That God strengthens us, even in the midst of adversity. That we are not alone. That, no matter what, God is indeed there. Even if we can’t or aren’t able to see it or recognize it.

Even in bad times, difficult times, there is always something for people of faith to be grateful for. The assurance that God is with us no matter what. The assurance that God loves us, not matter what. The promise of salvation and the forgiveness of our sins. The promise of new and eternal life made possible through God's greatest gift to us—his Son. Not to mention the other gifts that God gives us through the love and support of family and friends. We may not always get what we want, what we pray for. And we certainly don't understand why that might be the case. But what we trust as people of faith—what we know as people of faith—is that God is always, always, always with us, no matter what. That is always something to be truly grateful for.

By Jesus' definition, faith and gratitude are intertwined. That gratitude is even necessary to a complete faith. We seek to model this every time we gather in worship. Our worship is primarily about offering thanks and praise to God for all that he has given us, from the creation of the world to the promise of eternity with our Lord, and everything in between. In fact the Greek word for gratitude is *eucharistō*, the same word that we use for the central component of our worship: Eucharist. That what we do in this place is all about expressing our gratitude. In fact, the opening of every Eucharistic prayer says it all. In the *Sursum Corda*, we say (sing):

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

Yes, it is right to give God thanks and praise. An affirmation that we, as God's people, as people of faith, lift up our hearts in thanks and praise. That ours is a Eucharistic life. That the life of faith is a life of thanksgiving.

As one commentator notes, "By Jesus' definition, faith and gratitude are very closely related, that faith without gratitude is not faith at all, and there is something life giving about gratitude" (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, Homiletical Perspective, p 169). As our Gospel reading shows, Jesus puts gratitude at the very heart of faith. At the very heart of the life of faith. Because, as we saw with the Samaritan, gratitude saves us. Gratitude transforms us and makes us whole. It brings us even closer to who God created us and intends us to be. It brings us closer to God. Or, in the poetic words of Isaak Walton: "God has two dwellings: one in heaven, and the other in a meek and thankful heart" (*Synthesis*, Proper 23, 10/13/19).

Let us live out of the fullness of our faith and always seek to give thanks and praise—that in so doing we may draw closer to God, and that God may dwell in us.