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Proper 23C
Peace, Seattle
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Luke 17:11-19

HEALED BY GRATITUDE

It was a truth confirmed time and again by the reservation residents I came to know in my work with Native Americans: the most entrenched attitudes toward Indian people were found within the border towns that flanked the reservations.

It's in this same kind of racially charged setting that our gospel story takes place: a borderland, among an ethnically and religiously divided crowd, where the long history of animosity between Jew and Samaritan is palpable.

Jesus, Luke reminds us, is on his way to Jerusalem and all that will await him there; but no Mapquest coordinates will enable us to follow his route. For the geography of his journey is less about the lay of the land and more about how God rearranges the topography of the human spirit through him.

Only Luke, among the gospel writers, tells this story—not terribly surprising, since the Jesus we meet in Luke's gospel pays particular attention to folks who live their lives beyond the bounds of religious purity. By the time we get to the 17th chapter we've already witnessed the cleansing of one leper (Luke 5:12-14); and have heard the story of an outsider whose compassion becomes a model for all—the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:25-37) Now, as Jesus makes his way through this no-man's-land, these stories combine.

Ten lepers approach him. Keeping their distance they call to him: JESUS, MASTER HAVE MERCY ON US! **Seeing them, he has but one word for them: GO SHOW YOURSELVES TO THE PRIESTS.**

Do they wonder at his command as they observe their wounded flesh still very much with them? **We don't know. Whatever thoughts they have remain veiled to us.** They simply go. And as they go, while they are on the way, healing happens.

A healing story, plain and simple (if one can say such a thing about healing—of any sort!) **But then the story turns.** One of them, whose ethnicity didn't matter when he was covered with sores, seeing what has happened to him, stops on the highway, turns around, and comes back to Jesus. **Not only does he have new skin, he has found in his freedom, a new voice**—a voice full of praise and gratitude which he has no choice but to express!

Returning to Jesus, he throws himself at his feet, thanking God with joyful abandon! To this one, a Samaritan, Jesus says: **GET UP AND GO ON YOUR WAY, YOUR FAITH HAS MADE YOU WELL, MADE YOU WHOLE—SAVED YOU.**

Now here's where it gets a bit tricky. For how are we to understand the tone of the questions that follow? Does the fact that only one has returned leave Jesus surprised? Saddened? Angry? Disappointed? **And what of the question itself—WHERE ARE THE OTHER NINE? Isn't it a bit strange that Jesus would criticize the nine for doing the very thing he commanded them to do? There must be something else going on in this second half of the story. And indeed, there is. Luke wants to focus our attention not so much on the deficits of the nine, but rather**

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on the insight of the tenth. Ten are cured; but one receives the full measure of Christ's gift, because he caught on to something that had eluded the others: He caught on to gratitude.

We become whole persons, we live the full, abundant life of Jesus, when we live our lives grounded in gratitude! In gratitude!

"IF THE ONLY PRAYER YOU SAY IN YOUR LIFE IS THANK YOU," said the 12th century mystic Meister Eckhart, "THAT WOULD SUFFICE."

"To have faith is to live it and to live it is to give thanks...One might almost say, in fact, that "faith" and "gratitude" are two words for the same thing: to practice gratitude is to practice faith…"[1]

Martin Luther was once asked to describe the nature of true worship. His answer?
THE TENTH LEPER TURNING BACK.

Now there are plenty of circumstances in my life, and I suspect in yours, that have provoked deep responses in me—and gratitude isn't always the word I would use to describe them!
- Loss of job, loss of relationship,
- loss of health, loss of control, loss of hope.

These circumstances—and their kin—do not naturally and obviously lead to expressions of thanksgiving and gratitude! At least not for me!

It's a lot easier to focus on, to get mired in, the things that hold us captive than it is to claim the freedom that is our birthright by virtue of our baptism into Christ Jesus.

This, in part, is Paul's point in his letter to his young protégé Timothy who, it seems, has fallen captive to the circumstances of his pastoral call and is having a hard time moving beyond them. **What to do when hopelessness threatens to devour you? You remember who you are—and more important yet, whose you are.**

REMEMBER JESUS CHRIST, RAISED FROM THE DEAD—THAT IS MY GOSPEL, writes Paul. A GOSPEL FOR WHICH I SUFFER HARDSHIP, EVEN TO THE POINT OF BEING CHAINED LIKE A CRIMINAL. BUT THE WORD OF GOD IS NOT CHAINED.

I'll never forget a workshop I once attended on congregational outreach.
- The leader asked those of us in the room whether our congregations tended to overestimate themselves—or to underestimate themselves.
- Six out of seven of us in the room, all from different congregations, agreed we tend to underestimate ourselves—in other words, we didn't expect enough; we weren't living up to our full potential—and God's full potential for us!

But one guy, Glen, came from a congregation that had gone through a death and resurrection experience in recent years, and every time Glen spoke up, he had a smile on his face. He said, OUR CONGREGATION DOESN'T UNDERESTIMATE ITSELF ANY LONGER.
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE—WE'RE TOO FILLED WITH GRATITUDE FOR HOW GOD HAS CHANGED US TO UNDERESTIMATE OURSELVES ANY LONGER.

[1] Kimberly Bracken Long, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.4.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010). 166-168.

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What was the secret to their turn around? Not only had they learned to welcome the stranger, they had learned to welcome the change that accompanies welcoming the stranger. They had come to understand that in the process of moving together, God's gifts are revealed and received. **And they embraced that process with gratitude**.

It's gratitude that brings complete healing and well-being to the thankful leper, and this thankfulness is available also to each one of us, in every circumstance.

One of the newer health movements out there is one that looks to the positive effects that the practice of gratitude can have on one's mental and physical health, one's stress levels, even on one's longevity.[2] "Thousands of years of literature from around the world talk about the benefits of cultivating gratefulness as a virtue," says University of California professor Robert Emmons. "Grateful people take better care of themselves and engage in more protective health behaviors like regular exercise, a healthy diet, regular physical examinations…"Gratitude research…suggest that feelings of thankfulness have tremendous…value in helping people cope with daily problems, especially stress…" What's more, "people who tend to be more mindful of the benefits they've received tend to focus their attention outward." Emmons explains.

Intentionally practicing gratitude can change my individual life, for sure, but it can also change the character of a congregation.

- When we practice gratitude, we come to worship not just to "get something out of it," but to give thanks and praise to God.
- When we practice gratitude, stewardship ceases to be reluctant fundraising and becomes instead the glad gratitude of joyful givers.
- When we practice gratitude, mission changes from an ethical "have to," to a joyful "want to"—the work of grateful hands and hearts.[3]
- When we practice gratitude, our prayers move beyond THE ASK to a great thanksgiving celebration around Christ's table where we are filled to the brim with a grace that reshapes us for service in God's world, service grounded in gratitude.

At the beginning of the story, ten men are stuck in the "no-man's-land" of being socially, religiously, and physically unclean. **By the end of the story,** all ten have been healed. But one has something more. **He has *seen* the face of God in Jesus, recognized his blessing and given thanks for it.** And because of this, the tenth leper is not just healed, he is made truly whole—he is, in a word, saved.[4]

There is much in the world around us that would call us to forsake gratitude and to follow fear instead. But we will not go there. For we, too, have seen Jesus—crucified and risen.
And by his gracious accompaniment our lives are made whole.

Amen.

"Thou that has given so much to me,
Give one thing more–a grateful heart;

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[2] From the article, *Boost Your Health With a Dose of Gratitude*, by Elizabeth Heubeck at WebMD. Subsequent quotes are taken from the article, which can be found at: http://women.webmd.com/features/gratitute-health-boost
[3] Kimberly Bracken Long, op. cit.
[4] David Lose, *Working Preacher* website: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=10/10/2010

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Not thankful when it pleases me,
As if thy blessings had spare days;
But such a heart, whose pulse may be Thy praise."
~ George Herbert, Welsh poet, d.1633