

Sermon for the 20th Sunday of Pentecost Proper 23, Oct 14, 2007 Yr B
Jeremiah 29:1.4-7: Psalm 66:1-11, 2Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19
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After the Assyrians conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel, the region then known as Samaria, was reduced in size. By the time of Jesus, it was bounded by Galilee to the north, The Mediterranean Sea to the west, Judea to the south (in which Jerusalem was located), and the Jordan River to the east. Today, most of us recognize this area as the "West Bank." To go from Nazareth to Jerusalem, Jesus would either have to go east to the Jordan river and follow it to the sea of Galilee and then go west to Jerusalem or he could go through the hill country. One thing is certain, that the Jews and the Samaritans did not speak to one another.

The Jews worshipped in Jerusalem at the Temple. The Samaritans worshipped at Mt. Girzim at the top of the mountains. This is why the woman at the Well said to Jesus: "Our fathers worship on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." And Jesus responded: "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

It is reasonable to believe that Jesus would run into people with leprosy in the hill country as many of them lived in the valleys. The gospel this morning seems to indicate that either they knew Jesus or knew of him as he entered the village. Lepers could stay outside beyond the gate and beg for food. These lepers did what they were supposed to do; keep their distance

and call out “unclean, unclean.” But in this situation, they also called out, “Jesus, master, have mercy on us!” The old translation of this verse was, “Jesus, Master have pity on us!” What exactly they were seeking is not clear. They could have been looking for food, for money to buy food, or, as most people believe, they were hoping that Jesus would work a miracle and they would be cured of their disease. This, however, is not the point. The point is the response of Jesus, who, “when he saw them, said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” This statement is in keeping with the regulations that if a leper thinks he or she has been cured they have to go the Temple and have it verified by a priest that they are in fact free of any blemish that could be considered leprosy.

On the way to the Temple one of them realizes he no longer carries the signs of Leprosy, returns to give thanks to Jesus and he is a Samaritan. It is interesting that, almost always, it is outsiders who have a better prayer life than the Jews; it is the outsider who has faith in God. Notice how Jesus quickly turned away the man’s thanks. The man prostrated himself at the feet of Jesus and Jesus asks: “Was none of them found to return to give praise to God except this foreigner?” In other words, Jesus does not want the praise. He gives praise to God for using him to make them whole.

In this situation we can conclude that they were relieved of the symptoms of leprosy. However, this is not always the case with people who pray for a miracle, who pray for release from whatever it is that confines them.

Here in the western world we take these words literally and people get blamed for not having sufficient faith to become cured. People live on guilt trips that they do not have sufficient faith in God.

A number of years ago, one of the helpers with handicapped children at Lourdes in France, discovered that, while he was hoping for a ‘miracle’ for his back, he, in fact, experienced a healing that served him the rest of his life. In the process he learned the difference between being “cured” and being “healed,” a difference that can make a difference when we read the Gospel stories.

In our fast paced world where we read or hear about advances in medicine and treatments for a variety of diseases and we have a tendency to want to be cured and to believe we will be cured of what ails us. Combine this with a nation that believes in a God who will answer our prayers and we have a country, for the most part, that believes in magic, a magical God.

This is not how God operates. Fr. Joseph Martin once said, “Prayer for a sore tooth is best said on the way to the dentist.” He also was famous for saying, “Faith will move mountains if you bring a pick and shovel.”

There are those who, for whatever reason, experience what is referred to as a miracle. But these are few and far between. Most people experience healing. By this is meant, that they find within themselves the strength to continue to live with their pain, their limitations, etc. The healing comes about as the result of self-searching, of letting go of hurt, anger, resentments, jealousies etc. We learn to embrace our weakness, our illness, our limitations as part of who we are and we do not let them define our being. As Paul Ripple once said; “We leave with a loving God what we cannot understand and we go on living.” We are children of God, created in the image and likeness of God. The fact that we may continue to suffer does not prevent us from being a source of healing for others. The fact that we

may continue to suffer does not prevent us from letting God's gifts to us from being used for the betterment of others.

Jesus told the Samaritan "Get up and go on your way." Healing is not about wrapping ourselves in a cloak of grace and thanking God. Healing is about acknowledging the presence and power of God and continuing on our journey of making God a real presence in the world around us. *Take up your bed and walk. Go show yourselves to a priest. Go tell your friends what God has done for you.*

Each of these situations of healing was followed by a command to go and do something. Being made whole helps us see ourselves as God sees us. Being made whole, is an invitation to go on living, limited as that may be, to the best of our ability.

When Lillias was 95 years of age and confined to a bed she became depressed, had no purpose in life and wanted to die. After about a year of this it dawned on her that, in her language, if God was not going to take her home, she needed something to do. For the next almost five years, her mission was to tell the young girls who cared for her that God loved them. They responded with love and affection. Lillias became like a great grandmother to them as sat on her bed and listened to her talk of her love for God and God's love for them. From the confines of her bed, frail and weak, she ministered to those who were walking around helping her.

At nineteen years of age Michael was in a wheelchair, the result of a gunshot to the back, and his basketball career was over. He was one of those people who went to Lourdes hoping for a cure. Instead he became healed. Once he lost his anger at what happened; his resentment toward the

individual who shot him; his jealousy of his friends who could still play basketball; he found joy in life as he ventured into the world of those who are referred to as “other abled.” With healing came independence and a completely new life of caring for others.

Katie was an alcoholic who spent thousands on hospitals, psychiatrists, psychologists and other counselors in a desperate attempt to drink normally. She hated God and the clergy as prayer and going to church did not work for her and she came to believe she did not have enough faith in God to keep her sober. Someone talked her into attending an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting which, at first, she resented. She came periodically and, after a few years, began attending the meetings on a regular basis. A week passed and she did not drink; a month, then three and finally she had a year of no drinking. What did AA offer her that hospitals and doctors could not offer? The fellowship of men and women who had a desire to remain sober and happy. She admitted her powerlessness, found a power greater than herself that could restore her to sanity; made a fearless and moral inventory of herself, made amends for her inappropriate behavior and, for the first time in her life, prayed and listened to God. And finally, she reached out and helped others who were suffering from the same disease. Katy was not cured. She was healed, she embraced her disease and went on living.

Today, let us consider our limitations, our weaknesses, that which we believe is keeping us from being who we are, embrace our weaknesses and limitations and leave with a loving God what we cannot understand and go on living.