

Sermon for October 9, 2022
18c Pentecost
Proper 23c
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

2 Kings 5:1-3,7-15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

Later today we observe the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi with a blessing of the animals, a week later than I'd planned, but Covid has been delaying our lives for more than two years.

As it is, we sing the hymns today that note the grace we experience through creation and the special place St. Francis holds.

The collect for St. Francis goes like this:

Most high, omnipotent, good Lord, grant your people grace to renounce gladly the vanities of this world; that, following the way of blessed Francis, we may, for love of you, delight in your whole creation with perfectness of joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

We all need to express our gratitude for creation, not just our part of it, but the whole of creation. It is grace we need to allow to settle on our shoulders and and widen our faces with our smiles.

St. Francis smiled a lot, I believe, but he, like those in the lessons today was repulsed and disgusted by those suffering from leprosy.

Francis wrote: "When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I became, acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became the source of spiritual and physical consolation for me."

It's a famous story, St. Francis and the Leper. It goes like this:

One day Francis was riding the roads near Assisi when he was confronted by a leper. Though he felt nauseated by the sight and repelled by the leper, he felt compelled to dismount and go to the leper and kiss him. The leper extended his hand, and Francis, feeling compassion, gave him the little money he had. When he remounted his horse, Francis looked around the open road, but the leper was no where to be seen. Francis believed it had been the Christ to whom he had been drawn, and as a result, ministering to lepers became part of the ministry of the Franciscan Order.

Our scripture readings today play off the theme of lepers. Leprosy was a dread disease that separated the victim from family, friends and society. And it is leprosy that Jesus and Elisha address today.

“Were not ten made clean?
But the other nine, where are they?
Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

Three questions that are more difficult to answer than would first appear.
Yes, ten were made clean.
Who knows where they are.
Apparently just this foreigner is grateful.

But that’s too simple, and there’s always more going on in the Gospels that is on the surface. We don’t know where the other nine are. Much as been speculated about where they might be instead of bowing before Jesus in gratitude as the Samaritan.

Martin Bell in his book *The Way of the Wolf* wrote a long meditation on the paths of the other nine.

In Bell’s narrative,
one just fails to see a connection between Jesus and the healing, another praises God in the Temple,
and a third runs home to see his family for the first time in years,
and the tales continue.
Only the Samaritan thanks Jesus – The foreigner.

Foreigners have a lot to do with the lessons today. They’re all about foreigners in one way or another. Even Timothy is a Greek among Jews, who Paul encourages in his ministry to keep his eye on who is important and not on those who would challenge him as he preaches. You see, preaching to Jews about Jesus as the Messiah was not easy.

In the law, anyone who was crucified was cursed because it says in the law, “cursed is he who is hung from a tree.”
So Jews, who were looking for a Messiah in the line of David expected a warrior who would throw out the Romans and save their bodies, not for a servant who offered salvation for their souls.
So Paul reminds Timothy to speak the Gospel and not be ashamed of the truth he proclaims.

And then we find the foreigner Naaman, the warrior of Aram.
Here you have a man, a leader of men, who is suffers from leprosy. He travels to Israel after his wife’s slave, an Israelite woman,
tells her that a prophet could heal him.

Eventually he is sent to the Prophet Elisha, who tells him to wash in the River Jordan.
Naaman is so full of himself that he rails against Elisha for not even coming out of his hovel to greet him.

Naaman rails against the River Jordan as a filthy, refuse-ridden, poor excuse of a river. For Naaman, washing in the Jordan was just too simple. “If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it. So why not do something simple.” So Naaman does, and he is cured.

The Jewish scriptures hold each other in tension. Points of view held in one book, will be balanced by contrasting points of view in another book. Such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

In Proverbs if you live the good life, do the right things, and work hard, you will be rewarded. In Ecclesiastes, the rain and sun fall on both the righteous and unrighteous, and there’s no explaining why those who do evil prosper, and those who do good do not.

Jesus will be born the great great grandson of Ruth, a Moabite woman, a foreigner. No wonder he has an affinity for the outcasts, and what perfect a turn for Luke to write here of the gratitude of a Samaritan for his healing when those who were healed with him, presumably Jews, did not return to give thanks. But what happened to the others?

As I delved into this question, it occurred to me that maybe they did exactly what Jesus told them to do: go show the priests – at the temple. They’re a long way from Jerusalem. Why didn’t the Samaritan go with them?

He’s not a Jew, though he considers himself a descendant of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Remember the Samaritan women Jesus met at the well – Jacob’s well. They come from the same line, but they don’t consider themselves kin.

As I pondered the Samaritan leper, it occurred to me that the Samaritan didn’t go with them because he realized he was not welcome. When they were all lepers their differences didn’t matter, but when they were cleaned, they suddenly became who they had been before, and Jesus identifies the tenth as a Samaritan.

I have been toiling for weeks now, maybe months, to understand the role of suffering in the lessons. Suffering has bothered me most of my life. It makes no sense to me that there seems to be no reason for suffering in the world.

Why would a loving God allow suffering to exist? I still don’t know why suffering happens, but a light bulb went off as I pondered this Gospel lesson.

In their shared suffering, the lepers lost the differences that held them apart. It didn’t matter whether they were Jews or Samaritans or Gentiles, they were lepers. They shared that suffering, and the suffering tore down the walls that separated them. When their suffering was removed, the walls were back.

In second Timothy, Paul shares his suffering for the Gospel with his friend and devotee that they are both tellers of truth, and that even when we lose faith, Jesus is faithful.

Jesus teaches that life is simple. Love God, Love your Neighbor.

We are not told, life is fair, it’ll all work out, do good and you’ll receive good.

We all suffer at some point. The story tells us that at the last, St. Francis was given the gift of the stigmata, the wounds of Christ from the Cross were imposed on Francis' frail body, and his life of service was given over to suffering.

Please turn to page 833 in the Prayer Book, and read with me the prayer attributed to St. Francis.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

Amen.