“The Grateful Tenth”

Luke 17:11-19

November 22, 2020

North UMC

 I keep a log of my sermons in a record book with categories for the title, scripture, date, location, and “remarks” which I used to fill in during my first years in ministry. This week, I went back and looked up when I had preached on today’s reading. The first entry was in the first four months of my ministry, November 20, 1990. Location: Greensboro Church of the Nazarene. Remarks: “content ok; delivery unfocused.” So, what made my delivery unfocused?

 I was preaching at the annual community Thanksgiving service, which was mostly United Methodists from my congregation and members of the Nazarene congregation. But not all. The outliers were my Presbyterian in-laws who had driven up from South Carolina for the holidays. They sat in the front row.

 Midway through the service as the Nazarene pastor was leading a time of prayer and praise, he announced, “Let’s all give God thanks by raising our hands.” In that moment, you could tell everyone’s denominational affiliation by their body language. The Nazarenes were waving their hands and swaying with their heads lifted up and eyes closed. Jesus was coming soon and they were landing the plane. The United Methodists complied. They raised their hands, but no swaying. They looked like they were being arrested.

 And then there were the Presbyterians. My in-laws stood obediently clinching the modesty railing on the front row.

 This has been one of those years when we have been clinching the railing. Between the pandemic and the election, the recession and the natural disasters, this has been a white-knuckle year. Oh, we raised our hands, but more in surrender than in praise.

 This has been a year to throw our hands up because we been traveling on the boundaries of normalcy. That is where Jesus met the ten men with leprosy. They were outside the city limits, as was the medical practice to mitigate the spread of the disease. They were on the outside of society, outside of human intimacy and empathy, outside of religious cleanliness and social concern. And Jesus met them there.

 They recognized him as God’s hope of authority and power to cure their ailment: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” It was an expression of trust. They trusted that he could heal them even on the outside of the city. And Jesus performed the miracle with a twist. Not only did he heal them but he did it while practicing social distancing! He ordered them to walk into the city trusting that his socially distance miracle would take hold as they went to the priest for verification of their recovery. It was a full recovery. Not only were their bodies restored, their relationships were restored. No longer did they have to reside outside the city walls. They were reunited with their friends and families.

 It was an act of faith to trust in Jesus’ authoritative mercy, but there is more to faith in this story. Faith has two sides to it. Faith is a combination of trust and thanksgiving. Like a walnut with two halves, faith is made up of trust and gratitude.

 We see the second half of faith in the sole leper who came back to give thanks. He turned back, praising God with a shout and gave thanks while kneeling at Jesus’ feet. Before he went to the priest for the verification of his healing, the single leper turned back to express his gratitude. He did not wait until the religious official could confirm its effectiveness. He did not wait until he had reaped the benefits of healing by reuniting with his loved ones. He turned back to give thanks the moment the trust turned into healing. He models for us the two halves of faith: the trust that led to the healing and the thanksgiving for the healing.

 Thanksgiving completes our faith. It is not enough to ask for mercy; faith is also expressed in our gratitude. Faith takes root and grows when our trust leads us to give thanks.

 Why give thanks, especially in a year like this where we are still outside the normal, in this moment before we get verification of God’s mercy working?

 Our thanksgiving is a recognition that the God of mercy is the master of our lives. The grateful leper was acknowledging that his healing came from God through Jesus. When we give thanks we are acknowledging that the goodness and blessings and mercy we have received is from God. We did not earn it or create it. It is a gift from God.

 We give thanks for the tender mercies Jesus is doing right now in our lives. He saw them on the edge of town and started the healing before they got back into town. He met them in our brokenness. Jesus meets us in our brokenness here and now, and his mercy is already at work in our lives. We should give thanks for the mercy we are experiencing from day-to-day. Jesus is working his little mercies each day during this pandemic, little moments of peace and comfort that are sustaining us.

 Each day this week, look for those little mercies and say a simple prayer of thanksgiving. Try doing it three times a day. Offer a one sentence prayer of thanksgiving at the beginning of your day; offer a one sentence prayer of thanksgiving over your lunch or supper; and then before you go to bed, make a list of all the little mercies Jesus gave you during the day and at the end of that list simply write, “Thank you, God. Amen.” Then go to bed. Let that list be what you count as you fall asleep.

 We give thanks for the hope of mercy Jesus will do in the future. Gratitude would be the man’s way in the future. Jesus ordered him to get up and go on his way. The mercy of God would go before him to make that way passable. Just as God had healed him, so too would the mercy of God keep the leprosy from coming back. And so, giving thanks would be the song he would sing as he left.

 We should give thanks not only for what God has been doing, but also for what God will do. Giving thanks in advance is the supreme expression of faith. We are trusting that God will make tomorrow better than today, and will make next year better than this year. We express that faith with gratitude.

 Each day this week, stop yourself from worrying about tomorrow. Stop yourself with a prayer of thanksgiving. We have a lot to worry about in the coming weeks. Our oldest daughter is expecting our first grandbaby on December 7. They live in Toronto and as you can imagine it will be extremely difficult to cross the border. Ginny will go up right after the birth but there is a strong possibility that she will not be here for Christmas, given that the Canadian government requires all travelers to quarantine for 14 days upon arrival. So every night, while cooking dinner, we are having conversations about how we are going to do this and how to ensure that none of us gets sick prior to the birth so that Ginny can get up there. It is pretty easy and tempting for all that planning to degenerate into anxiety.

 And it is pretty easy and tempting for anxiety to take over your prayers. Too often we vent our worries under the guise of prayer. We repeat and repeat our requests to God. Then, our prayers become nothing more than a magical incantation, as if we can get the desired outcome from God if we say it enough and in the right tone of voice and using just the right words.

 With every worried thought counterbalance them with a word of praise and thanksgiving to God. We have a lot of problems we need to ask God for mercy. With every petition conclude it with a prayer of thanksgiving to ensure that our prayers do not become a projection of our perseveration. In all our planning, we give thanks that the pregnancy has been going well, mother and baby are healthy, and Ginny will be able to enter the country. For every worried prayer balance it with a word of praise for God.

 Why thank God? We thank God for what God has been doing morning, noon, and night. And we thank God for what God will be doing tomorrow, next week, and next year.

 This year will be a strange Thanksgiving, but it is not the first time in our nation’s history when we have had to scale down our celebrations for the common good. During World War Two, Americans at home and on the war front had to make adjustments for the first wartime Thanksgiving in 1942. In addition to food stapled being rationed, rubber was redirected for the war efforts. Macy’s canceled its parade for the duration of the war so that its balloon characters could be shredded and given for scrap rubber for war production.

 And like us, that Thanksgiving came on the heels of deep divisions. Just prior to Pearl Harbor, Americans were divided about the war and even about Thanksgiving! In 1939, to accommodate merchants who wanted to start the Christmas shopping season early, Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving back to the third Thursday of the month, and for three years Americans celebrated two different dates, one called “Republican Thanksgiving” and the new date called “Democrat Thanksgiving,” also known at “Franksgiving.”

 With the war, Americans were reunited on the date in 1942 even though our troops were scattered around the globe. More than any other place, England helped American troops celebrate Thanksgiving with special vigor and reverence. Towns and villages staged parades, families hosted servicemen, and Westminster Abbey hosted 3,000 soldiers and sailors for a special service.

 But the most poignant services took place in Plymouth, England from which many of the pilgrims originated in 1620. The Archbishop of Canterbury conducted services for American servicemen and the town’s residents surrounded by the ruins of St. Andrew’s Church, where some of the Pilgrims prayed before they boarded the Mayflower.. In March 1941, the Luftwaffe had bombed and badly damaged [St. Andrew’s Parish Church.](http://www.standrewschurch.org.uk/about-us/history/)  More servicemen gathered at Plymouth to attend services in the ruins of Charles Church which had also been fired bombed by the Germans.

 Like their Thanksgiving, this year will not be ideal. But like them, we can give thanks without the normal festivities because of what God is doing and for what God will do. Let us complete our faith with gratitude. Let us give thanks this year for the healing and hope of Jesus Christ.