

Sermon by The Rev. Jim Nixon

October 13, 2013

21 Pentecost - Proper 23

St. Catherine's Episcopal Church

O Lord, graciously accept the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts that they may prepare us to forever rejoice in your kingdom. Amen.

I've spent a great deal of time this week occupied with a question having to do with today's Gospel.

Am I more like the one healed leper who turns back to Jesus to say thank you? Or am I more like the 9 healed lepers who went on their way?

I was raised by parents who taught us to say or to write thank you. And in my personal life, my corporate life and now my church life I have done my best – certainly not perfect, but my best – to say or write thank you. Yet, I know there have been and are times in the busyness of my life that I have simply gone on my way forgetting to say thank you or to show gratitude in any way for something or someone very special.

And so I'm left with the question. Am I more like the one healed leper who turns back to Jesus to say thank you? Or am I more like the 9 healed lepers who went on their way?

It is a question worthy of our consideration in our life, but particularly in this time when we consider our response to St. Catherine's invitation to consider how God is inviting us to give – to say thank you, if you will – to the church. The New Consecrations Sunday stewardship program we used last year and once again are using “teaches stewardship on the basis of the need of the giver to give for his or her own spiritual benefit rather than on the basis of the need of the church to received to balance its budget. So the questions for everyone of us is ”What is God calling me to do?” It is to this question that our Gospel proposes an answer.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's approached by ten lepers who, keeping their distance since they are both unclean and outcast, seek his mercy. In tradition of scripture he tells them – “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” They go and, as promised, as they travel they are made well, cleansed of this dreaded disease. And then one of them upon noticing that he's been made well turns back to fall at Jesus' feet in gratitude for his healing.

Now it's important, first, to see that the other nine do not do anything wrong. Jesus says nothing about coming back to say thank you. He promises healing. They go on their way and receive the blessing he promises. So it leaves us to wonder why the tenth leper returns and falls with gratitude at Jesus feet.

Let's return to the story. Jesus recognizes the tenth leper and asks where the other nine are – a very reasonable question it would seem to this observer. Indeed all 10 are made well. Why didn't they all return. But then something happens. As Jesus looks down at this foreigner and says to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” The verb Jesus uses here implies something much more than healing – he in essence says that the leper's faith has rescued him or saved him or made him whole in addition to healing him. In other words Jesus gives this man a second blessing. First the blessing of healing and now second the blessing of

wholeness and salvation.

Have you ever noticed how pleasing it is to the soul; or how powerful it is to our hearts to receive a blessing but also to name it and to give thanks for it? Joan and I were in Asheville recently and had a meal together that was one of the finest meal experiences (place, company, food) we've had in a long time – it was a blessing. But in the celebration of the meal, in our wine glasses lifted in thanksgiving, in the actions of our waiter in receiving our joy the original blessing of the meal was somehow multiplied.

One writer puts it this way, *“Thanksgiving is like that. It springs from **perception** – our ability to recognize blessing – and **articulation** – giving expression, no matter how inadequate it may seem at the time, of our gratitude for that blessing. And every time these two are combined – sight and word – giving thanks grants a second blessing.”* (www.theworkingpreacher.org)

This is what the nine lepers who went on their way missed. They didn't do anything wrong. They simply missed seeing their good fortune and didn't voice their blessing to the source of their healing. In so doing, they missed out on being made whole.

This is why I give to the church in general and to St. Catherine's in particular. It makes me whole – or least moves me in that direction. I have no illusions that what I give makes the difference as to whether St. Catherine's is here today or tomorrow – that is God's business. I give because I am made in God's image – a God who gives abundantly – and therefore in the words of one of my friends – I am hardwired to give. My giving is my way of throwing myself at the feet of Jesus alongside the leper made whole and saying thank you, Jesus. Thank you for all that you give me that makes me whole day after day after day. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for a family that loves me and in so doing shows me the profound nature of your unconditional love. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for blessing me with a community of faith that loves me and nourishes me even as they know my faults and failures. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for St. Catherine's and how she challenges me and picks me up when I stumble just as your words challenge me and your forgiveness picks me up when I stumble. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you.

Am I more like the one healed leper who turns back to Jesus to say thank you? Or am I more like the 9 healed lepers who went on their way? I must conclude that I am both. There are plenty of times that I miss throwing myself at the feet of Jesus in gratitude and in so doing miss being made whole. But when it comes time for stewardship and comes time on October 27 to complete my estimate of giving card, I will come to the feet of Jesus, my Lord. And I will complete that card in gratitude and with deep thanksgiving for all that he has done, is doing, and will be doing in our lives. And in some mysterious way I will be made whole – if only for a short while. This is why I give.