

Sermon 10 12&13 19

I read something the other day that really struck me, probably because I am aware of how easy it is to become tired and impatient. This is what I read: “We might have to learn the most difficult lesson about loving: how to *accept* the love of God, especially as it come to us mediated through the fallible people who share our life.” And that - would be - if course - *everybody*.

And then I saw this picture that we are using on the front of our program. There was Jesus, right after he cured the lepers, and they’re all running off to be blessed, as he told them to. The priest’s blessing meant they could reenter society. They were undoubtedly becoming more healthy as they ran and it must have been surprising to them that they *could* run! They could see their families again, they could hold their wives and husbands and children again. Who has the time to thank God!?!

And there’s Jesus, in the background, lookin’ kinda lonely - and one man is running back to thank him — *one man!* Those people were all fallible! We’re *all* fallible!

And that one man? He was a Samaritan, a foreigner - the only one to praise God, to thank God for being returned to good health and the last one any of the Israelites would have expected to show gratitude. Samaritans were barely above animals in the Jewish peoples’ estimation of them. They were hated, despised, and yet he

was the only one to take the time to say, “Thank you.” Maybe he understood more fully than the others what gratitude really meant.

Long ago, when Babylon conquered Israel, they destroyed the Temple and the homes of the most influential citizens. Then they carted the intelligentsia and the artisans off to Babylon. It was actually very clever. All those who were farmers and herders were left behind to care for the land so that it could remain productive. I’m covering this rather simplistically in order to get to the point. There were a number of uprisings and rest assured, conquering Israel was not a bloodless matter. But this is the context from which the author of our Old Testament reading, Jeremiah, sent his letter to his fellow exiles in Babylon. He knew God planned for them to return to Israel, but how did God want them to plan for their return?

God planned for them to multiply in much the same way that God planned for the Israelites to multiply in Egypt. Through the Bible we can see that God often used exile like a tool to further the kingdom. He urged the Israeli exiles to make a home for themselves in Babylon, to build houses and take spouses and have children. And, (and this is very important) to pray to God for the welfare of their conquerors, because their conquerors’ welfare was now their welfare. They had to have faith that God would bring them home when the time was right. It took 70 years - just over a generation.

Just about the right amount of time for the Israelites to be forced to start over, to be forced to remember who God was and is.

The Israelites had to learn that God would even use pagan Babylonians to teach them how to live among others and yet remain true to the words of God, to the worship of Israel.

Our psalm says, “Bless our God, you peoples - Who holds our souls in life, and will not allow our feet to slip. For you, O God, have proved us; you have tried us just as silver is tried. You brought us into the snare; you laid heavy burdens upon our backs. You let enemies ride over our heads; we went through fire and water; but you brought us out into a place of refreshment.”

God will always bring us out. God will always bring us back to a place of refreshment - one way or another - through faith.

Think of the 10 lepers who approached Jesus. Talk about exiles! They were exiled from families and friends. In fact, they are still exiled to this day in separate communities in India, China, and Africa, even though the disease is not very contagious. But it *is* ugly.

The lepers who came to Jesus didn't ask to be healed. They probably believed they were beyond healing. They asked for mercy. Jesus simply told them to show themselves to the priests, who could authoritatively attest to their health. They didn't even bother to check themselves apparently. They were healed while they were on their way! And yet, they were healed.

The one man who returned to Jesus to thank him received a special gift. It wasn't just a magic touch or word or glance from Jesus that healed him. No. His clean clear skin, his extra energy, his sudden ability to praise with a loud voice, his ability to fall at Jesus' feet, all that was the result of that special combination of Jesus' energy, and his own faith.

Was that combination necessary? No. Jesus healed people all the time who had no idea what was going on - like the other nine lepers. But this man received a special gift. He was given the ability to understand how powerful his faith could be.

We don't know what happened to him after this very important episode in his life. But we do know that he had a lot to think about. How did he accept God's love? How would he share God's love? How did he go on with his life?

We are given the gift of these stories. How do we go on with our lives? How do we see our faith? How do we use our faith to continually make us well, make us whole, to make us witnesses to the power of Christ in our lives? No matter how weak or flawed we may be - how do we do that?

But before we share the love of God, we have to learn how to accept the love of God, especially as it come to us mediated through the fallible people who share our lives. We are all fallible. We all

need forgiveness. We all need God's love. We all need to share that love.