

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost  
9 October 2016

Scripture readings:

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7    Psalm 66:1-11    2 Timothy 2:8-15    Luke 17:11-19

You don't have to know anything about biblical history if you read or heard the gospel today to know that Samaritans are bad people. Samaritans are foreigners. They come with disease. They have leprosy. They are politically on the wrong side of the fence. They are probably economically dependent. They are socially ostracized. They are not friends; they are enemies. They are not to be helped.

You may remember last week Kathleen raised concern about the psalm in which there was an expressed desire by the Israelites to dash the children of their Babylonian oppressors against a stone and how we thought that even though that's in the Bible, that's probably a bad idea. Here again we're faced with these gooks and geeks and foreigners and strangers and outsiders and people who are problematic and with whom, quite frankly, Jesus is not supposed to be communicating because that's probably treasonous - communicating with the enemy. And then, on top of all of that, we're faced with a miracle.

Now most of you have known me long enough to know that I have trouble with miracles when understood simplistically to be the suspension of the natural order. Now the question is do I think God can do miracles? Yes. My question is do you believe that the world in which you live is a miracle? Pause for a moment to consider this: that the organism standing in front of you, who I know to be myself, in pushing wind through vocal chords which is vibrating the air between us and reaching your eardrums, going through your body into your brain and having meaning. How's that for miraculous! How about what happens when you draw a breath and oxygen is exchanged and you live. We fail, I believe, significantly to appreciate the miracle that life is and, I suppose, as reluctant as I am, we have to include death as a part of that miracle.

There was science reported in the news this week attempting to understand what the ultimate limit of human life might be reasonably as we generally live longer, and the ultimate age was 115. Well, guess what? I'm sure Aunt Gertie has another 25 left at 101! *[laughter]*

We're presented with this miracle story which, as you know, trips me up a little bit, and I want to know what the miracle is here. As I've looked at this, I've had an idea. Let's see what you think about it. "*Jesus, Master...*" Now these guys were not in a position to call Jesus Master, but they recognized something in him that they knew was superior so they gave him that. "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.*" They wanted something from him. They wanted to be treated mercifully because nobody - not even their own kind - would treat them mercifully. And all Jesus does is say to them, "*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*" And as they went, they were made clean. What do you think really happened there? These people were told that they were no good, and they were also led to believe that they suffered disease because God was displeased with them. Now that's a fashionable idea in religion even today, isn't it?

There have always been plagues throughout history. If you visit the great medieval cathedrals in Europe, sometimes you will see what is known as a "lepers' window" up near the altar. Through the thick stone walls there's a tiny little hole that's been carved through, often at an angle, so that the lepers would stay outside and could watch the mass without contaminating the priest or the rest of the people in church. Even though they didn't have the medical awareness and astuteness to cure disease, they knew something about quarantines even back then. It was understood that the wealthy who could get out of the cities and into the countryside were safer than those who were in the cities.

That's old-fashioned kind of thinking...isn't it? Do you remember the 1980s? Anybody here old enough? Do you remember when AIDS wasn't understood? Do you remember what people said: That's God's condemnation of those awful people? That's God punishing them with disease. It's still a current idea among some that God makes people sick because God is mad, and God is judging and God is punishing, and God's gonna get you! It's the theology of Santa Claus: "*Oh, you'd better watch out, you'd better not cry, you'd better not pout. I'm telling you why...*"

But something happened to these ten guys. They saw something in Jesus whom I believe saw something in them. It was a brief encounter. It was an encounter on their part of believing that Jesus could do something about their situation, and so they were open to what he could do. He didn't do so much as pray over a plastic container of water to make it holy. He didn't do a thing except say, "*Go show yourselves to the priests.*" And at the end he takes no credit but says, "*Your faith has made you well.*"

What do you suppose really happened? I believe what happened was a change in the theological ideas of the lepers. They, by virtue of being loved by Jesus who was not supposed to love them because they had a tunnel under the wall, they came in without papers, they were a problem for society, for the economy, for the country, and they were just generally hated because they were who they were - they go to Jesus and he looks in their eyes and sees value, and he sees them as healthy creatures with particular problems but as whole beings who stood before him and in standing before him who saw them as whole and valuable people, were healed because they came to believe through his eyes that they were, in fact, loved by God. That's a powerful reality, to own our identity as valuable. Because some of us are pretty good at self-loathing, aren't we. And sometimes we cover that up as arrogance. We compensate for that with egotism. But Jesus looked into their eyes, their situation notwithstanding, and loved them in their situation, and they went away whole, and they went to their religious leaders to say, "*God's impression of me is not what your impression of me is.*" They were healed.

Let me tell you about a healing of a similar sort that I experienced long before most of you were born - 1969 to 1971 [*laughter*], when I went to Chicago to the Lutheran School of Theology there which was attempting to be relevant and understand the urban reality. So a bunch of small Lutheran schools scattered around the Midwest clubbed together to build a new building. So the first thing they did was go in and tear down two square blocks of affordable urban housing and built an award-winning building.

I hated every blessed second that I was in Chicago. However, I'm eternally grateful for the time I spent there for experiences such as this one: Occasionally we would go on a Saturday morning to a meeting called a Bread Basket meeting which was usually in a synagogue. It sat between two and three thousand people. It was packed on Saturday mornings with urban, poor and primarily black people. Some of the young women were especially attracted to the very handsome young man who led those meetings whose name was Jesse Jackson. Whatever your politics, that's not the point. The point is one of the major exercises in those meetings was a chant that went back and forth for a long, long time. Well, try it. Repeat after me: *I am! I am black! I am beautiful!* The fact that that needed to be done with populations of people was the business of healing the leprosy that had been inflicted upon generations of people who were told by others... Let's talk about illegal immigration. Let's call it slavery. They didn't have papers. They were told by generations of people who were their masters that they had no value other than that of beast of burden. No identity, no right to family, property, education. You all knew James. One of the astounding things: as a young man in Virginia where he was born, he was forbidden for no other reason than the color of his skin to go into the library. Forbidden!

And these are systematic things that we engage in as societies and cultures and empires, of denying people the health of their personal identity. Those who organized Bread Basket meetings understood that the

way to heal the problem of the leprosy that was affecting thousands and thousands of people who got it there was to help them regain their identity as children of God who were beloved and lovely and valuable, no matter what the current situation, to understand themselves as children of God.

That's why a baptismal font becomes so important in the life of a church, especially in our tradition where we're happy to baptize babies. Not everybody is, but that's a discussion for another time. But you get a baby, you don't know what you've got there, whether or not you have the next president of the United States or the next occupant of a jail cell. It's for all people, all genders, all kinds, with the same message: that you are whole, you are complete, you are loved by God, and you are a part of this miracle which we call life which we don't entirely understand. Thank God! As a part of being a member of the Body of Christ or just a member of creation, nobody gets here without being baptized. Your mother broke water. Get it? And that's why a font is sometimes seen as the womb of the Church where Mother Church breaks water to give birth to sons and daughters of all kinds, of all shapes, of all colors, of all circumstances. I think the healing of the lepers in the story in the gospel this morning is about returning to them a solid theology that no matter what their physical circumstance, they are healed and whole as creatures of a loving God even though they're damn Samaritans, even though they don't belong here, even though they interrupt our economy and politics and society, even though they don't have papers, even though all of the rest of it.

Jesus gives those people health by responding to their belief in him as Master and him telling them to take that belief back to their religious leaders. That's all that happens in the gospel today. No magic! It's an affirmation of the humanity of those who have been excluded systematically and purposely.

Do you remember the 80s? We know this story intimately. We know it first-hand. Sometimes, friends, *we are* the leper. Did you hear in the epistle lesson today St. Paul says, "*This is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal.*" Sometimes my belief in the gospel becomes leprosy to others. It looks like a sickness, but it ain't. And so we have this extraordinary gift of this beautiful, beautiful parable of healing which is all about owning who we are as God's children and doing what Jesus did - acknowledging in the sick, dependent, pain-in-the-neck or lower foreigner who comes to us diseased and communicable and problematic and saying, "*Tell your religious leaders you're whole. Tell them you're God's child. Tell them you're healed.*" No magic. Just owning who we are, which then frees us up to believe that everybody else is accepted by God if we can believe that *we are*. This is health by belief. Your faith has made you well - your faith that you are a child of God and so is every other leper who comes your way. Powerful stuff! Amen. But I'm not done. *[laughter]*

I have to give you one example from those Bread Basket meetings. I remember being in a Bread Basket meeting with Jesse Jackson one Saturday morning in Chicago. There was a man, whose name I've forgotten, who was brought to the stage. He was the owner of a chain of grocery stores called Red Rooster Stores. He was caught moving shelf-dated meat from the suburban stores to the urban stores for re-sale without reducing the price, and it shouldn't have been there in the first place. He faced a congregation of 3,000 poor people who simply understood that that was wrong, and he publicly agreed and promised not to do it anymore. That's healing! And you know what, the healing was more his than it was theirs because when he was brought there, he wasn't under threat. He was cared for and he was faced with the reality and he changed. And I think that's our opportunity today - to constantly be in the process of being healed ourselves and being thereby equipped to heal the world. I think that's what the diocese was after in putting us in touch with other congregations, and I think it's one of the things we do best and will do even better when we finish this and go sit down next door and have lunch.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.