

“Jesus Heals Ten Lepers” Grace Episcopal Church The Rev. Gary Coffey
10/13/13

I want to begin the homily this morning with a bit of a disclaimer. What I want to say is that I know that there are myriad things that we do as a parish that involve your giving of your time. I also know that this month of October is unusual in the number of opportunities that there are to serve through our parish. With this next week being the only one that we could get to host the women at The Room in the Inn, and with the startup of the Habitat House, coupled with the Pumpkin Patch and our normal commitments like The Backpacking Program, The Monday Welcome Table Meal and The Steadfast House Meal, it has created a sort of perfect storm of more commitments than we may be able to fill.

So, we are just going to have to do our best to get through October and that is all that we can do. I was visiting with a friend of mine who was the pastor of a thriving United Methodist congregation when we were both serving churches in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and he brought up an interesting point.

And like us here at Grace, he was blessed with a number of young families in his congregation. And what he said was, “You know, Gary, the last thing that these young families need is for us to try and get them to participate in another program at church in addition to their overprogrammed lives.” He said, “What they may need from us is a place of worship and refuge from the busy-ness of their overdemanding lives.”

His name is Brian and I told Brian that I thought that he was right. So, what I would like to say to you, the people of Grace, young and older, is that the last thing that I would want Grace Church to be is a place

where you come every week and feel guilty about not having time to participate in this or that ministry.

All of these opportunities are open invitations to which I want you to feel perfectly free to sign up or not sign up according to your availability and your desire to do whatever the particular ministry is asking you to do.

That said, it is absolutely critical, if we are going to follow our Lord Jesus, we need to provide opportunities for people to serve, particularly the poor, through these many ministries. So, we will continue to offer them for those of us WHO ARE ABLE to participate in them. However, please know this. If you, for whatever reason, you are not able to sign up to pack backpacks or to give a day to build a Habitat House, as examples, we as a community of faith want to assure you that that is just fine. If you are not able to do one of these ministries at this time in your life, obviously God is not calling you to do so.

You are following Jesus in many other ways, by allowing the Holy Spirit to transform you into the image of Christ day by day, and you may or may not even notice that this is going on. One day you may just discover that you are more patient than you once were or that you are treating everyone around you with more care and kindness. And you will know that these things are not something that you are accomplishing. Rather, they are the fruit of the Holy Spirit that the Spirit is bringing forth in your life. And when you notice this, what can you say, but, thank you, Lord, for you had little to do with it.

You are following Jesus by coming to worship. You are following Jesus with the care that you are showing your family and friends and even strangers. You are following Jesus by trying to memorize and meditate on our weekly verses of Scripture with the hopes of planting them in your mind and heart so that the Holy Spirit can bring them to your remembrance as needed. Sometimes when I find myself getting angry, the Holy Spirit brings the passage from James to my mind to help me, the passage says, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger”. That, Beloved, is the reason that I am asking you to join me in learning one verse of Scripture each week. We are following four important teachings of Jesus, one each month during the months of September through December. In September, the teaching was on cultivating humility in our lives. This month, the theme is loving God, next month it will be loving others and in December it will be learning to see the trials of life as learning opportunities. Pray for me and I will pray for you as we try to learn and meditate on these passages week by week. The goal is to read and think about the card at least 7 different times during the day. One way to do this would be when we get up and go to bed plus 3 meal times, that’s five, then at 2 other times during the day. Again, please pray for me. As you know, structure is not my strong suit. And I will pray for you. This is not easy, but it is something that could literally change our lives for the good if we can pull it off, if we can learn these Scriptures by heart. And don’t forget to learn the Scripture reference so that you will know where to find it in the future.

I was talking recently to Thomas Murphy, one of the priests at All Souls, and he said, “Since Grace Church is known for its healing ministry, we would like to partner with you on this project.” I had never thought of us as being known in the community for something in particular, but I think he’s right about that. Not only do we have a big healing prayer ministry that is integrated into just about all of our worship services, but pretty much everything we DO and everything we ARE seems healing or wholeness related if you think about it. From all of the 12 Step Groups who meet here to our feeding ministries, to the pastoral care that we provide to one another when we are hurting, Grace is a healing place. Maybe that’s our motto, “Grace is a Healing Place”! Even our worship services, it seems to me, are about finding wholeness in Jesus through Word and Sacrament.

Speaking of healing, the Gospel reading for today, as you heard, is about Jesus healing 10 people of leprosy. It is an interesting healing story in several ways.

It is interesting in the way that these people were healed. They cried out to Jesus from a distance asking Him to have mercy on them. He didn’t call them over as he often did. He didn’t put his hands on them as he often did in the other healing stories.

What He did do was tell them to go show themselves to the priest who could declare them clean again. Now, this was a great test of their faith, wasn't it? Because here they were, still plagued with these sores all over them. In their situation, with the sores present, the priest would have told them that they were unclean and that they needed to not only live off somewhere by themselves but to stay a prescribed distance away from those who were healthy, and if a healthy person were to come their way, they were to cry out to that person, "Unclean, unclean!" to let that person know not to get any closer. This dreaded skin disease was a terrible thing that separated them from their families, often for the rest of their lives.

But, you know what? They trusted Jesus enough to do what he told them to do. Despite the fact that they were not healed at that moment, Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priest, and they took off. And on the way, they were healed. After they had stepped out there in faith, and on their way to the priest, their sores disappeared and the disease miraculously left them. ON THE WAY, they were healed

The other noteworthy point to this story is that only one leper returned to say thank you to Jesus for healing him, and he happened to be a Samaritan. Jesus said to him, "Go in peace. Your faith has made you well." How had his faith made him well? He had trusted Jesus enough to move in obedience off to see the priest, BEFORE he was healed.

Jesus seemed a little ticked off that the other nine had not returned to give thanks to God. Probably in their exuberance and in their hurry to rejoin their families, they simply got distracted and forgot to come back and thank Jesus not only for healing them, but for giving them their lives back. O happy day!

Today is the day, in the homily, where I must say something about the upcoming pledge or stewardship drive. If you are not a member of Grace and are here as our guest today, you just got lucky, I guess, and came on the only day of the year when I talk about giving money to God.

Rather than choose another passage of Scripture that more directly addresses our privilege of supporting the Kingdom of God financially, I thought this passage addresses two things well that we want to be a part of our thinking where giving to God financially is concerned.

The first thing is that we want to give to God out of thanksgiving. We don't want to be like the nine lepers who, in their excitement about getting their lives back, got distracted and forgot to give thanks. Rather, we want to be like the one leper and remember that everything we are and everyone in our life who is a blessing and everything that we enjoy is a gift from our gracious God, and we want to say thank you to God by returning to God by our financial pledge to Grace part of what God has provided for us. Again, not out of obligation, but out of thanksgiving.

The second and final thing that I'd like to say about giving to God is about the *the spiritual practice* of giving financially to God. It is not unlike memorizing Scripture or coming to worship or exercising kindness in our lives. Making a pledge is laying out a plan for a giving discipline. And the actual making of the pledge and that plan to give regularly is more important than the amount of the gift. Because regardless of the amount, the commitment and plan to give regularly is the discipline like coming to worship or praying regularly.

Regarding the amount that we pledge, some of you were present at that service a few weeks ago when I forgot the offertory sentence. That day, I told those present that I heard of another priest who also forgot the end of the offertory sentence one Sunday. What he meant to say was, "Remember the words of our Lord Jesus who said it is more blessed to give than to receive." What he said was, "Remember the words of our Lord Jesus, "Y'all give what you can!"

All jokes aside, regarding the amount of your pledge, I know that y'all will give what you can, what you are able. If you are able to give a lot, you will give a lot. If you are able to give a little, you will give a little. The rest of us will give something in between a lot and a little. And altogether, by the grace of God, it will be enough.

So, this year, to encourage you in the discipline of making a pledge, we are setting an ambitious goal of 150 pledges. I think that one reason that folks are sometimes hesitant to make a pledge is that they are afraid that they won't be able to follow through on it just like I probably wouldn't tell someone that I'd be sure to pray for them every day for a year because I'd be afraid that I wouldn't follow through on it.

But this is where that teaching from today's gospel can be helpful to us. Remember that, as those ten lepers obeyed Jesus and tried to do their part in heading out to see the priest, it was on the way that they were healed. It is the same for us. If we will make a pledge that we plan and hope to fulfill, then God will honor our effort, and help us follow through with it just like God honored the effort of those lepers and healed them.

In closing, Grace Church is a healing place, not a place where we try to make people feel guilty. We try our best to offer GRACE, not guilt, here at Grace Church. We will continue to offer all kinds of ways to participate in ministry. Some of you will be called by God to these ministries. Others of you will be called to serve in other ways and in other places in your life. May God help us to remember to be thankful and that often it is as we step out in obedience that we find the wholeness that God has for us. AMEN.