**Twice Blessed**

*Luke 17:11-19*

They had nothing to lose because already it felt as if they had already lost everything: their health, a sense of belonging to the larger society, and an intrinsic sense of self-worth. The Master was passing through their border town, the region between Samaria and Galilee. They were already outsiders, the ten of them were isolated and remote, united in their suffering, together in their difference, made one by their disability and degradation. They were lepers, we are told, though their bodily ailments could have been anything from pervasive skin lesions to Hansen’s disease, from unsightly boils to missing fingers and toes. They may or may not have been contagious, but they were surely perceived as such, and surely ostracized. And one of the ten, among all the others, as a Samaritan, was an outcast among outcasts.

They had learned not to expect too much kindness from stranger or friend alike—or too much goodwill. The disparaging look, the silent assessment of their worth, their value to society, the limits of what they might or might not do or be or contribute—these belittlements they had come to expect. These micro-aggressions they had come to know as they found themselves on the other side of a wall that they did not construct, a wall that divided “the faithful” from the “faithless,” the righteous from the sinner, the pure from the impure, the superior from the inferior, fine gold from leftover dross. Denied access to basic community and the fundamentals of a stable life, they followed the rules of the larger society, despite being cast out and shunned and treated as second or even third-class citizens of God’s world.

So they had nothing to lose when the guru from Galilee passed by their village. Keeping their distance as was expected of them, they got the Master’s attention with their loud cries and begging. And, with his word and his affirmation falling gently on their ears, they found the mercy they sorely lacked and the first signs of healing that they sought. After noticing the isolated ones, Jesus sent them back to the priests who would certify their wellness and give them the necessary stamp of approval for their social and bodily fitness.

Curiously, it was in the walking that the ten lepers were made well. That is, the healing and wellness occurred as the 10 isolated ones found themselves on the same path back to the Temple. They discovered an even larger healing as they *looked forward* to an even greater restoration and reclamation of their worth and dignity as human beings.

Friends, has there been a time when you were living out the “not-yet,” or the “almost-there”? Has there been a time in your life when just the reaching for something significant has restored you in some way? Has there been a time when the act of your waiting for someone or something actually grew legs, hands, and purpose, and your sheer perseverance through difficult times and in the hard places set your Spirit on a trajectory of healing?

Perhaps you did not know the specific recipe for your wellness, but found that by doing one small thing differently each day, you slowly and painfully rebuilt your life and your very being. Or maybe you did not believe initially that you could do or try anything new or challenging, but you were determined to reach beyond the borders and walls that you had unintentionally constructed for yourself and others, and by dismantling one stuck behavior at a time, your friends and family began to notice the remarkable change building in you. Or perhaps, you found yourself in an unlikely place at an unbearable time and someone spoke the most needed word that brought you back from your lonely isolation and helped you to find your way again on more stable footing. And that person kept speaking that truest-of-true word loud enough that you could hear it, and eventually claim it for your own truth.

As those ten isolated lepers made their way back to the Temple, they were healed. But then one of them notices the healing, becomes aware of the changes taking place in heart and soul, and notices the difference between what-was-then and what-is-now, then turns around to return to the Master to give thanks. He pauses on the way to say thanks to the One who reached out, to the One who crossed borders and walls and human misery to be merciful, kind, and to be a faithful friend. He pauses on his way to restoration to shout his praises to God, his gratitude to the goodness that has upheld and sustained him. And mark *this*--he was the Samaritan, the outsider—as opposed to the insider. Did you notice? For a second time, Jesus blesses this foreigner, *this outsider* who was the double outcast.

The one who returned to give thanks was twice blessed. David Lose has written, “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 actually grants a second blessing.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Seeing the blessing and then expressing gratitude for it are separate actions. United in the leper, they bring about not only a double blessing for the one healed but also for the healer, in this case, Jesus.

So, friends, it is important what you choose to notice along your path. Not only is it important what you notice, but also that you take the necessary time in your journey to pause and express gratitude for what you have been given and what your eyes can see and your ears can hear. In so doing, you are doubly blessed.

But let’s face a hard truth—most of us take for granted so many things that we no longer notice what is no longer new, no longer esteem what we think is our just reward. We no longer pay regard to the blessing that might not exist in other circumstances or in lives unlike our own. Too often, we no longer care about noticing what we have because we are frequently too busy focusing on what we still lack. Even something as precious as time, we fail to appreciate. We each have this one moment to enjoy and cherish and often we are caught complaining about other moments—past or future—that are well beyond our grasp.

We are beginning our Pledge and Stewardship season here at this church. Each year we come to you, our members and friends, to consider again what you might be able to contribute to the church for its well-being and its ministry. Usually when we do these kinds of drives, we tend to ask you for more dollars to sustain our mission, our outreach, our worship, building and staff needs. We thank you for blessing the church with your presence and prayers and for increasing our impact. True enough, your dollars and time are important and necessary and would go a long long way in helping Bethesda United Church of Christ continue to bless and to be for others an embodiment of God’s beloved community in action.

Yet, I believe that something more is necessary. The Christian church is a bit like one of those 10 lepers these days. Some people are afraid of getting too close to the church, afraid of the contagion that comes from toxic attitudes towards otherness or difference, afraid of returning to priests and leaders who may abuse their trust, vulnerability, or the power of position, and afraid of getting caught up in anything that promises false hope or false relationship.

Let’s admit together that we have greater work to do than to simply increase our giving to our ministries and budget. We need to invest ourselves personally and deeply in the message of God’s mercy and embrace for this day and age, not just as a church in the abstract or of the past but as individual members of Bethesda United Church of Christ. We need to reclaim today the church’s voice by witnessing in word and in deed the kindness, love and dignity that Jesus shared and embodied, not just on Sundays or when it is convenient, but every day and when it is *inconvenient*, in all the times and places we find ourselves.

Our blessing should not stop with a periodic, obedient return to the Temple for our own needs, but the *Temple’s return to the people for their empowerment and the strengthening of society as a whole…*Those people on the borders need to hear from us. Those people who have suffered at the hands of the powerful need to hear from us. Those sisters and brothers who have been routinely shut out, shut down, or shut up because their healing is still far away need to hear from us. Our church can issue official letters and proclamations; it can offer prayers, classes and sanctuary, labyrinth walks and anti-racism training as an honorable and bold beginning, but it needs all of you to embody the courage, commitment, and conviction of its values: that of God’s mercy, kindness, love, justice, and dignity unending. You demonstrate healing given along the way; you are the ones that will show people a different way to live and be in a troubled and chaotic world.

Friends, your dollars alone cannot buy that kind of witness, but they help. In an election year where immigrants are treated as lepers and rape culture is encouraged at the highest levels of leadership, Christians must provide a loud and dauntless counter-testimony to the rhetoric and hurtful actions that isolate, demean, and degrade. We must do this with our financial commitments and also our commitments of time and energy—not just on a given Sunday, or any given Stewardship season, but in all those times and places where God brings our individual voices, actions, awareness, and response. The healing of our society will happen along the way, as we are obedient to God and as we present our experience of Jesus as faithfully as we are able.

And sisters and brothers, this stewardship season, I am asking you to show up. Show up at Church with your attendance, and show up to communal gatherings of all kinds. Show up with your Christian principles at the voting booth, at schools and boardrooms, in hospitals and sickrooms, on Capitol Hill and in the voting booth. Show up with your questions; show up with your children; show up with your dollars and gratitude; show up with your hope for this present moment and for future generations; show up with listening ears and your compassionate heart. And show up with Jesus. Not as an after-thought, or as an absurdity, but as the passion behind your witness, your wisdom, and your wonder.

Perceive the blessing in this moment when others cannot or will not perceive differently.

And then, thru our collective witness, may we all be doubly blessed, not just healed, but made well.

Amen.

1. David Lose, “Second Blessing,” October 7, 2013. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2796 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)