

Sermon for Sunday, October 9, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today's gospel
is one of those wonderful stories
of the way that Jesus
healed people
as he travelled around the towns and villages
of his native land.
It's set
in the area between
Samaria
and Galilee.
If you were to look at a map of the Holy Land
you would have Galilee up at the top,
with Nazareth
and Cana
and Capernaum,
and of course the Sea of Galilee.
The land there
is fairly good,
with relatively high rainfall
and plenty of agriculture.
Then down south
is Judea,
stretching from Jericho and the Dead Sea on the east
to the Mediterranean,
and area that includes the Negev desert,
but also, of course, the holy city Jerusalem
and the hill country
around Bethlehem.
And then
in between
is the mountainous regions of Samaria,
was where the Samaritans lived,
a group of people
that had some different beliefs
than mainstream Judaism,
and who were generally thought of

as significantly inferior,
even heretics,
by most Jews.

So Jesus was traveling through
the area
where Samaria and Galilee met,
one where Jews and Samaritans lived
in fairly close
proximity.
And as he was going into one village
he heard some shouts,
"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"
And Jesus stopped, and turned
and saw them,
ten of them,
clothing torn,
and even at a distance
their skin scarred and distorted.

And he called back,
"Go and show yourselves to the priests."

Almost disbelieving, they turned towards the village
a place that had been denied them
because of their illness,
while Jesus stayed where he was
perhaps waiting
to see what would happen
or maybe just taking the chance to rest
after a long walk.

And as the ten of them
headed into the village
their skin began to feel different,
almost like an itch,
and they looked at one another
and saw the swelling
going down
and the scarring

smoothing out,
and it seemed
that maybe, maybe,
their long isolation was ending
and the disease
gone.

And they headed all the more quickly
to the synagogue
where they hoped to find
the local priests,
the only ones
who could declare them
ritually clean
and fit to return
to society,
almost falling over their own feet
in their hurry.
All except for one.
Who had been lagging a little
anyway;
banding with the others for company
but always an outsider,
inferior,
a Samaritan
and not
a Jew.

And he looked at his hand
smoother and clearer by the minute
and suddenly it didn't seem to matter at all
what the priests had to say.
What mattered
is that not just his skin
but his life
had been transformed,
and he rushed back
to Jesus,
falling in front of him.
“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Hmmm...” said Jesus.
“Where are the others?”

And the disciples looked around
but there was none else in sight.

And Jesus bent,
and said to the man,
“Get up.
Your faith
has healed you.”

Though that word in Greek
is ambiguous.
Healed?
or saved?

“Get up.
Your faith has saved you.”

Either way, it seems,
what mattered
was the Samaritan’s faith.
And the Samaritan’s faith
was expressed
in thanks.

Today
is the first Sunday
of our fall stewardship campaign.
The theme this year
is living generously.
And I suspect we all know
that the people who are most generous
are also
most thankful.
They see everything they have received
as a gift from God
and are thankful.

And living thankfully
is something
that can transform our lives.
Instead of being buried by suffering
and hurt
and failure,
practicing thankfulness
can indeed save us.

Recently

I was listening to a politician being asked questions at a town hall meeting.

One person asked
how do you deal with the tension
between the ego required
to run for public office
and the humility needed
to deal with failure?

The politician gave a fairly long answer
drawing on their faith tradition,
but ended it all with this:

...”Practice the discipline of gratitude.

...Regardless of how hard the days are, how difficult the decisions are, be grateful. Be grateful for being a human being, being part of the universe. Be grateful for your limitations...Be grateful. Practice the discipline of gratitude.”

<http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/03/politics/democratic-town-hall-transcript/>

In other words,
be thankful.

Yesterday

a number of parishioners and I
had the privilege of being at the funeral service
for Mother Paulette Schiff.

For those of you who don't know,
Paulette

was the interim priest here
in 2006, right before I came.

It was near the end of her time here

that she was first diagnosed with cancer,
and for the last ten years
has gone through multiple rounds of treatment,
remission,
and relapses.

During that time,
we have enjoyed seeing her and Walter in the pews on occasion,
and a number of parishioners
have been involved in helping her in practical ways
during her treatment.

Yesterday
was a wonderful service,
a celebration of her life.
She had chosen her readings
and hymns,
and what struck me
as we moved through the service
was the consistent theme
of thankfulness.
Not just for Paulette's life
but for everything
that we are given.

At the heart of it
was the Eucharistic prayer.
Eucharist literally means
thanksgiving,
and the prayer is wound through and through
with thankfulness,
which not only at a funeral,
but every time we celebrate it.

And the hymns that Paulette chose.
We sang
"Father, we thank Thee who hast planted
Thy holy name within our hearts.
Knowledge and faith and life immortal
Jesus, Thy Son, to us imparts.
Thou, Lord, didst make all for Thy pleasure,

Didst give us food for all our days,
Giving in Christ the Bread eternal;
Thine is the pow'r, be Thine the praise." (Hymn 302/3)

And we sang
"For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord."

And then
as her ashes were carried out,
the final lines
of that great hymn
based on the words of St Francis,
"All creatures of our God and King"
the final lines
sounded triumphantly,
"O praise him, O praise him,
Alleluia, alleluia,
alleluia!"

And in the psalm of the day,
Psalm 84
which we sang in hymn 517,
"How lovely is thy dwelling place"
which ends with these words,
"For thou shalt surely bless all those
who live the words they pray."

One more song
has been echoing in my head all week.
I learned it as a kid, in Sunday school, I think.
It was written by Miriam Therese Winter,
a member of the Medical Mission Sisters,
a Roman Catholic religious order

who serve people in need of health care and healing throughout the world.

In 1966, a recording of their music was released called "Joy is like the rain"

and included in it

was a hymn about the ten lepers that begins "Ten unclean and nowhere to go"

And in the fourth verse, it asks,

"God gives gifts to us every day,

Favors His people in every way;

Hope restored and pain relieved -

Do you ever give thanks for a gift received?"

(You can read the full lyrics here: http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Medical_Mission_Sisters:Ten_Lepers)

Do we live

the words that we pray?

Do we live lives

of thanksgiving?

Do we ever give thanks for a gift received?