

SERMON - THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 2 SEPTEMBER 2018  
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina  
Father Mark Menees, D.D.

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The Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity Gal. 5:13ff Lk. 17:11ff

+In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Perhaps I will be “preaching to the choir”, and the organist, when mentioning Issac Watts. He was an English Congregationalist minister, and while the name may not be particularly familiar, the hymnody from him likely is: “Joy to the World, O God our Help in Ages Past, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” As a nonconformist he was not allowed to study at Oxford or Cambridge, yet his book on logic was used by both for over 100 years. He was prolific and insightful with his prose. But at times he could find human behavior perplexing. One of his poems reveals that struggle:

“There are a number of us who creep  
Into this world to eat and sleep  
And know no reason why they're born  
But merely to consume the corn,  
Devour the cattle, fowl, and fish,  
And leave behind an empty dish.  
The crows and ravens do the same.  
Unlucky birds of hateful name;  
Ravens and Crows might fill their place  
And swallow corn and carcasses.  
Then if their tombstone when they die  
Contain no flattery or lie,  
There is nothing better will be said  
Than that. They've eaten all their bread  
Drank up their drink and gone to bed”

That is a bit droll for modern sensibilities, but used as a way to reflect about life it does allow us a glimpse at the question, ‘what is life intended for?’ Is there a purpose beyond satisfying basic needs and desires?

In one of the few times you will hear me quote the Westminster Catechism, consider the first article or inquiry. “What is the chief end of man (humanity)? Answer: “To Love God and Enjoy Him Forever”. Take that in for a moment as THE definition of the purpose of life!! “To Love God and Enjoy Him Forever”. What do you think it means to ‘enjoy God’? Is it perhaps to take life and order it in light of this great gift and Giver? Is it to receive in love and adoration the friendships, familial ties, simplest wonders as signs of God's heart? Perhaps if we look at the inverse it becomes clearer—when we love and enjoy something else as our primary focus we are no longer free but caught. We call it idolatry. When the children of Israel made for themselves the Golden Calf, it was not the inert metal that harmed them; it was their self-absorption. Idolatry starts to become oppressive because it demands from us who are partial without renewing and making whole.

The scripture today is quite familiar—The story of the 10 lepers. It is a narrative about healing and being made whole; of having life redefined. The text says they ‘came to Jesus’. It sounds trivial like stage directions, but it isn't. They are unclean and publically have to wear their garments torn as a sign of degradation. Whenever they go into a street or alleyway they are required to call out ‘unclean, unclean’, in order to warn others not to come near.

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These people are excluded totally from all things communal, especially worship. They are even put apart and separated into ghettos. Can you begin to imagine what it would be like to be healthy and interactive and accepted and then...one day a lesion or spot arises on a digit, and everything changes. All of life gets diminished never to return to its former state. This seems foreign to us does it not? But...

In our own sickness of body and soul, weakness, sin, or mere weariness do not we, too, feel isolated? If that spot, which on the leper appears physically, but in us is hidden in our souls, psyches, should appear visible, what would be the result? Shame or self-imposed exile? How many of us fear being known, and that if we were, would be rejected? To be among others and feel alone or to be in bondage owned by our own idols is not unfamiliar territory. Perhaps we are all lepers in a sense.

The Gospel tells us they “come to Jesus” crying out for mercy, because they have no place else to go. Jesus commands them to go to the one locale they cannot go—to the priests at the Temple. They are excluded from those precincts. It is initially an odd request. But, they do go, and we are told ‘one the way’ they are healed. It is hard to know if this means they at least had a spark of trust, or simply left and journeyed without knowing the outcome. And one of them—not only a leper physically, but socially by virtue of nationality, comes back to the origin of his wholeness and **falls on his face. That is a euphemism for Worship:** standing and bowing before the face of God. Enjoying God! The beginning of all true life, true purpose, true healing is Right Praise. By the way, that is the meaning of the word orthodox—ortho-right; doxa-praise. Right praise leads to a rightly ordered, structured, and perceived life. It places us as recipients of life—people who live knowing the giftedness we enjoy.

This one leper returns. He returns to rightly order his life for he worships before the new temple—Jesus. His gratefulness is a paradigm of what loving and enjoying God, and therefore full life, is truly about.

So, let us pose some questions. Where in our lives we have been freed from bondage or from the unbearable? Where have we been gifted with strength to go on when we thought it not possible? What is that you and I no longer carry because of God's gift of grace which has redefined our value as people? How does life ‘look’ now?

“Were not 10 cleansed? Where are the other 9?” That question has plagued and perplexed me for years. I suppose it could be a literary set-up to emphasize the return of the one who would not have been expected to worship as Jesus' feet. The healing of the others is not rescinded for their failure to return. God does not work that way. It is not likely that Jesus' feelings are hurt due to a lack of gratitude. Nothing in scripture suggests that he gave or gives healing on a ‘quid pro quo’ basis—“I'll scratch your back if you will scratch mine”.

I wonder (I do not know) if the question merely heightens the Samaritan as foreigner to show how far ‘out of the boundaries’ God's great grace will go. Or perhaps there is a tinge of sadness that one thing was missing: they were healed of an ailment, but missed some completion. Your faith (your worship) has made you whole. There is something more than physical healing. It comes when body and soul find wholeness is loving God and enjoying Him forever. Amen.+