

SERMON - THE 14<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 14, September, 2009  
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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Gal. 5:6ff

Luke 17:11-17

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

The Collect, which brings together the focus for each Sunday, asks, “Almighty and everlasting God, give us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and that we may obtain that which Thou dost promise, make us to LOVE that which Thou dost command...” We rarely think about loving something or someone we are commanded to. What if I had to marry who I was told to? That seems to take some of the spontaneity and fun out of life. Instead we may grudgingly acquiesce, or even in a more pleasant moment acknowledge that what we have been directed to do is really a good idea and worth the effort. All in all it seems a little strange to think of being ordered to love. But notice that the Collect first asks for an increase in faith, hope, and charity for these create the context that allow us to see God’s commands as gifts rather than simply as demands. To be asked or even “strongly urged” to do a particular act is seen very differently when the request comes from a stranger in contrast to someone we know, respect, and love, and who we know loves us!! The challenge, and it is a tough one, is to live in and be mindful of our relationship with God day by day; moment by moment; event by event! It is what St. Benedict calls stability; staying and remaining constantly in that relationship even in the smallest things everyday.

Our minds are a mystery. Have you ever been driving, or even better, riding through your own neighborhood and suddenly noticed a building or house that you had not seen before? You have travelled this route hundreds if not thousands of times over the years and now you spot a place that you would swear was not there the last time you came this way. Yet, when you look it is obvious it is not new construction, but has been well lived in or used. How does that happen? Psychologists must have some name for it, but I call it the unknown familiar. It is what happens when we come to simply assume that what is really out there is what we already know. It is a form of taking our world for granted. All of us know what it is to lightly presume that an important person in our life will always act in a predictable way only to discover something has changed!! Surprise or maybe even distress results. What I am talking about is failing to see the

uniqueness and beauty in every moment we have been given. It is to become lost in things that do not matter, and this leads us to forget the love that holds the world together.

The Gospel account from St. Luke puts this picture before us. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, ie. to his eventual giving up of his life, and on the way a group of lepers plead that he give life to them. We know this story so well any of us could likely tell it. It is very familiar. But what is it that is unknown or not so clear that leads Luke to place this in his Gospel account so that we will see it? There are at least 2 things that are essential here. The first is God's willingness to act for us without regard to our own worthiness, social status, (which lepers clearly did not have) or even our faithfulness. Jesus heals all 10 of these people and that healing remains firm, even when they fail to return. God's faithfulness is never a matter that is dependent on us! The second aspect is striking in its simplicity; "Were not 10 cleansed? Where are the nine? Is no one found to give glory to God, but this foreigner?" Go your way, your faith has saved you. (zoe) There is something here beyond mere healing. The 9 do not have healing taken away, but this one man has something else along with his wellness. **I think it is that his gratitude is a sign of his interior awareness that God's presence in his life means more than even the healing!!** Jesus' question, "where are the 9?", is not to be taken that he feels unappreciated. There is no mistake in God's actions. Rather it is more of a lament, that those who go through life without recognizing God's moment by moment presence are the ones truly damaged by ingratitude. It leads to an existence akin to scavenging. Taking what is available without realizing the wonder of the gift. The 9 have received it, and don't even know it.

Issac Watts, the hymnist who wrote Amazing Grace, likened the story to his poem:

"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"

I do not particularly relish being compared to scavenging birds, but the image speaks for itself, doesn't it, especially where we fail to be thankful?! It is at this very point that the contrast between the Samaritan and the Nine stands out most clearly. Because he responds and realized the graciousness of God to him all, he is blessed even more. "Arise and go, your faith has Saved you." Salvation here means that you have a new lease and vision of life. You now know that you really are dependent on God for everything in your life, and your heart is glad for the gifts. Faith is NOT what creates these gifts, but it is what receives them and sees them for what they are—Acts of God's gracious love. This puts fragmented life back together. It takes us from looking at what we have and saying this part I earned and that part I was given. It leads us know it is all a gift, and that is what constitutes wholeness. Things that don't matter can not put us in bondage.

What is it that leads us to be grateful? Let me ask you this. Have you ever been rescued or set free from a threat? Perhaps not in a dramatic way like someone doing CPR on you. But you have stood in the waters of Baptism. Who can fail to see the power of God for the helpless there? Who among us has faced death, dying or grief—the places we are most helpless and vulnerable—as part of the Christian community and not seen a glimmer of the love of God? Who can look into the face of the crucified and not sense what God is doing on our behalf? Rescued from threat—YES!

I received a very unexpected phone message this week. A person whom I had not heard from in 15 years called. It was someone I had assisted while she was in graduate school. Actually, I think I wrote a letter of recommendation, and along the way responded to some chapters in the dissertation that was being written with a little commentary here or there, but nothing that might be considered a hefty contribution. The call was placed by one of her friends, and I soon discovered that her voice was uneven, halting, and at times she struggled to make herself coherent. This was clearly not the student I had known those years ago, who was now a college

professor. I learned she had gone to a movie with a friend and upon leaving became very disoriented and ill. Diagnosed with a migraine headache, she was sent home, but hours later someone read the MRI and realized it was a ruptured aneurysm. She spent the next 4 weeks in Intensive Care and months in therapy, only to discover that there is another aneurysm in the frontal lobe of her brain. She will have surgery in the next week or so. She is of course frightened I believe, and the outcome of this new operation is not assured. Her career future remains unknown at this point as well. To say that this was a sobering conversation would be an understatement of monumental proportions. Yet, I was struck by the attitude she exhibited. “Since you had helped me I wanted you to know what was going on. I am grateful to be alive, and thankful to be able to do even as much as I can. I walk some with a cane, and can’t move part of one side of my body. But I can still read and find pleasure in life.” I wished her well, and could not help but wonder how I might be if I were in her place.

Have we been rescued, set free, or saved from the deepest threats of life? Maybe not all those things that frighten us, but from the ultimate fear of being left without love or grace, the answer is yes. We can be thankful-eucharistic people, who know that each moment is a gift. +Amen+