

Proper 23 Year C

“then one of them when he saw that he was healed, turned back praising God with a loud voice”

In elementary school I remember three children who were constantly teased...Mary Miller, Paul Lee Phillips and Charles Finney....they were the archetypal misfits and they were constantly picked on by the rest of us... someone would touch Mary Miller and then chase us shrieking, “Mary Miller germs!”...proverbial lepers among us....Imagine the pain inflicted, the indignity... we harassed them so much so that at recess, they would stand apart from everyone else on the playground to avoid the perpetual hazing. I wasn't the ring leader of this abuse, but I did participate and I still feel guilty to this day.

Our reading today is somewhat odd and in an odd place. Jesus and his disciples are on the last leg of their journey to Jerusalem; and we are told that he is in the region between Samaria and Galilee....a sort of no man's land that would be populated with both Jews and non Jews. So yet again, Luke is playing with his audience's xenophobic tendencies.

So let's first put the story in context, remembering again Luke's overarching theme in this gospel. In Mary's song which serves as preface or prelude we are told of a new order to society....a world turned upside down socio-economically...in which the poor are filled with good things and the greedy and callous rich sent away empty; the turning upside down of the socio-economic pyramid....that has been the governing theme as to what the coming commonweal of God will look like. Throughout this gospel Luke is giving us pictures of what this renewed world will look like. But in our passage today as in other healing stories in Luke, the writer makes a finer point about the coming commonweal of God that sounds more like good news for all rather than a cataclysmic social and economic revolt. Here Luke is talking about restoration, not revolution, restoration of the world the way it was conceived in the beginning. The ten lepers who are required to stay apart from their community by Jewish law call out to Jesus for mercy, the word can also be translated salvation...master save us. The lepers were always hanging out apart but near the town or village so that they might beg for alms...but here they ask for mercy from the one whom they see as a man of God....and Jesus heals them after telling them to go and show the priests that they are no longer unclean. It was the job of the priest to certify purity in Jewish law. These are yet another example of the marginalized for Luke, those for whatever reason are ostracized from their communities, their

families, the ones they love, and the ones who loved them....the non persons. This is not so much turning the world upside down as it is restoring the world to the way God intends it to be....that all are included in a community of equals....that there are no outcasts, and that all of God's people share in the love, nurture and abundance that is the commonweal of God. And to make the point forcefully, Luke says that the one praising God for his healing is a Samaritan, the despised foreigners to the north of Judea...we're not told who the other nine were whether they were Jew or Gentile....and much scholarly ink has been spilled about being grateful for what God has done for us, implying that the nine other lepers are somehow ungrateful...I imagine they did just what Jesus told them....they joyfully made a beeline to the priests....and certainly there's truth in that we live in gratitude, but I don't think that is Luke's main point...I think the point is that the Samaritan leper praising God is a symbol of the church, perhaps giving thanks on behalf of the other healed lepers....but a symbol of the church bearing witness to what God is up to in the world....healing, restoring.

That's another theme in Luke...the birth of the church, and the church's chief business is praise...through Adam and the Patriarchs and prophets...and now in Jesus and those who would follow him....and in Acts also written by the writer called Luke, we see the church blossoming in the eastern Mediterranean region and its one signature is praise....indeed the very last words of Luke's gospel is that the disciples were continually praising God in the Temple.

And praise for what? Certainly praise for what God has done for us...but much more than that, praise for what God is doing in the world...and we are not bystanders....standing apart...but we are a part of the building of this gracious commonweal...we as the church are sons and daughters of God sent into the world to restore the least and the lost, those standing apart....to invite them as equals, germs and all to a proper place at God's table....what a noble enterprise....what a privilege that God would entrust us, flaws and all, to be the bearers of the Spirit that ushers in the restoration of the world as God would have it...In every kind act...in every gracious invitation...in every act of compassion ...in every act of welcome... the world God intends takes on flesh...and that dear friends of God is worthy of praise....across the centuries some of the most beautiful music ever written was written for praise in the church....I was asked some time ago if our church did "praise music" y'all know what that means in our part of the world...guitars, drums etc. But when asked that question I always respond, yes we're all about praise music.... The highest praise music, and

rightly so, because God has called the church into the restoration of its intended egalitarian order; heaven in earth in short. And that is something for which to give God thanks and praise....and at last when the outcasts have been welcomed home, when those on the margins know dignity, when the dead among us are raised to life, when all are gathered at God's gracious table....I hope to see Mary, Paul Lee, and Charles in the seats of honor.