

Pentecost 20, Proper 23, Year C
10-10-10

*...one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.
And he was a Samaritan.*

There is a lot of talk about borders these days. Borders are dangerous - wars begin there, armies cross them, people are killed trying to cross over them, lives are changed by these invisible lines. Borders are places we guard because we feel vulnerable when we are near them - people who aren't like us come too near and we want to keep our distance from them. Sometimes we put up fences and walls to make our point. And pretty soon, everything is "Us and Them" - "Us" being good, and "Them" being not good.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is going through the region 'between' Samaria and Galilee, an even scarier place than being on the border. He is on the way to Jerusalem to face what is waiting for him there.

As he enters a village, a group of lepers approach him. Not too close. Remember that lepers were outcasts from normal community life. They were considered, because of their disease, to be unclean. Therefore they were excluded from everything - they couldn't live with their families, they couldn't worship with the community, eat meals with the community, even go for a walk or just have a chat with the 'normal' folks. Losing their lives because of the disease was probably not the worst thing that could happen to them; they had already lost everything else. They had nothing. They had no hope. They had to stand across the border that had been established between the community of normal people and the 'community' of outcasts and watch what was happening in the real world from a distance.

So staying a safe distance away from Jesus, the lepers call out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" And Jesus does precisely that. He shows them mercy. He didn't touch them, he didn't pray over them. He simply had compassion for them.

Then he tells them to go present themselves to the priests. This is not for a spiritual blessing per se, but for a medical checkup; the priests were responsible for certifying someone cured. A medical cure from their disease so that they could return to their places in the community. So the ten lepers took off to find the priests and on their way they were made clean. The leprosy disappeared. They were cured before they even got there.

Now it seems quite probable that all ten of the lepers were grateful for what had happened to them. How could anybody not be that way in the face of such a miraculous cure? But only one of them turns around and returns to Jesus. He is so grateful that he throws himself down at Jesus' feet and begins to thank God and praise God for what has happened. And Jesus says to him, "Get up and go your way, your faith has made you well." A different Greek word than the one used for 'made clean;' that one has a medical context and means literally to be free of disease. But the word for 'made you well' has a theological context, not medical, and it means 'being made whole,' or 'being made complete;' Jesus said, Go your way, you faith has not just made you free of disease, but whole, complete, saved. So all ten of the lepers were given their lives back, but only one was given the fullness of life.

And he was a Samaritan.

What difference does that make?

Well, probably it makes a difference because the Samaritan was still an outsider. Even though he had been cured, he wouldn't have been welcome at the temple or by the priests. He was still a foreigner, and sometimes it is necessary to see through the eyes of someone looking from the outside in to realize what gifts we have been given. The other nine, presumably Jews, could go back to life as usual. The tenth leper would remain separated from the other by virtue of his status as one of 'them.'

But he didn't return to Jesus because his mother taught him to be polite and have good manners: "My mama told me to tell you I had a good time." Instead, to be made well, whole, complete, we must include thanksgiving in our faith. Instead of just being happy about a physical cure, thanksgiving and praise to God take us far beyond that to a reorientation of our inner lives. We become grounded to the Source of all the gifts we receive, all the life and love we receive every day from the Source of our being - the loving Creator God.

And when we are able to thank the source of this love, we are more able to share it with others. Not in a hokey, in-your-face sort of way that seems unreal - that often offends and puts people off - but in a sincere way that conveys the hope that is given to us through the grace of God. When we are grateful for and grounded in God's love, we love others in a way that means we all become "us" - that we treat each other with respect and with dignity - that the borders that separate us from them disappear - that we become one community of the people of God.

I have two people in my life who are in need of God's healing love and compassion. One is someone I went to high school with - we were in choir together every day for 4 years - but I haven't seen her in almost 40 years. We have become friends again through - you guessed it - Facebook. She is a very devout Christian - she professes her faith in a much more vocal way than I do, and while it sometimes makes me uncomfortable, I have no doubt about her sincerity.

A little over 3 weeks ago, her several-times-a-day posts on Facebook stopped. After several days of wondering in the back of my mind why I wasn't seeing anything from her, a message came from her sister that Debbie had been diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer and is in a great deal of pain. Things don't look good for her. Yet she and all her family, who write for her when she isn't up to it, talk as if...as if she will be healed...as if their prayers and our prayers for her will make her whole, will make her well, will make her complete. She and they have faith.

A few days after I learned about Debbie, I received a group e-mail - one that was sent to lots of people at once - from my sister, to tell us all that her husband is sick. He has been in remission for 2 years from the cancer he had. This new cancer is, irony of ironies, caused by the chemo he took for the first cancer. It is very aggressive. He is in a great deal of pain. Things don't look good for him. Yet my sister, who writes for Brian on his Caring Bridge site, talks as if ...as if he will be healed...as if their prayers and our prayers for Brian will make him whole, will make him well, will make him complete.

She writes: There is grace everywhere. It is pouring down on us every day and night from all of the many, many expressions of love and support that come from you all-- friends and family--to the incredible medical care Brian is receiving from [his doctor] and her staff, ... and all those at the clinic, the wonderful, caring, skilled and humorous staff of the cancer unit to all those we don't even know across the country who are praying for healing and recovery for Brian. We even have a choir friend who's been in

India during all of this. These powerful prayers have gone international!! I've said it before and will forever say that Brian's miraculous recovery in 2007 is a direct result of that grace--all that I named above--along with Brian's (and my) strength and determination and belief that he will be healed and whole again.

Gratitude. Thanksgiving. Grace. Love. Hope. Faith. Brian and Debbie may not be cured, but they will, like the tenth leper, be made whole. "Faith is not certainty so much as it is acting-as-if in great hope." ([Wounded Bird](#) blog, Grandmere Mimi)

Let the people say, "Amen!"