

October 16, 2020
Psalm 121
Luke 17:11-19
Making Room for Grace
Michael Stanfield

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?’ ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ ¹⁹Then he said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’ This is the word of the Lord.

Let us Pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen

Today we continue with the theme of Grace that we began last week. And as we do I have a confession to make before we start: I am *not* a naturally graceful person.

Being a native of the South, I was taught from a tender age to respect those in authority no matter what and that anything good that came my way needed to be earned. The result has been two-fold: First, I developed a kind of inner authority that was an amalgamation of all the authority figures I ever encountered when I was young. This inner authority has pushed me towards excellence which is not a bad thing. But it can also be downright tyrannical at times.

Second, I developed a great work ethic that for the most part has served me well in terms of outer successes but has at times caused me to worry and fret when in fact there was really nothing to worry and fret about.

Living as if life must be earned from an authority figure – whether that is Father, Mother, Teacher, Boss, or God tends to keep one from taking anything for granted. And that is good. However, it can also keep one tied up in knots.



And when one identifies with a faceless authority that must constantly be assuaged while at the same time uses a good work ethic as the full measure of another, one begins to judge the intrinsic worth of that other based solely on what that other can get done in the least amount of time. A particular idea of “fairness” then becomes the measuring stick of who gets what.

In other words, these folks deserve more than others because they work harder than the rest. These folks don't deserve more because they don't work as hard. While this is not a bad *general rule*, it eventually gets in the way of God's grace when it is applied as an absolute. And it is only a short step away from seeing folks as less deserving because they don't work hard enough, to seeing anything bad that happens to them as something they only brought on themselves.

Of course, this is really off base where the living God is concerned because when it comes to God's grace, a good work ethic and fairness are not really factors. On the contrary, how hard one works and what's really fair are irrelevant and even beside the point.

The fact is that some of us are just more gifted with the laser like focus and stamina that it takes to get jobs done and get them done well. I tell anyone who is looking to get their doctorate or PHD that it is less about being intelligent than it is about being obsessive and compulsive when it comes to completing an onerous task. And it is that same ability to focus and concentrate one's effort to complete complex tasks excellently in a timely manner, that can and often does become a kind of tyrannical task master.



In point of fact, time always seems to be an issue with me – as in I never seem to have enough of it. And I am afraid that outer reality makes little difference where this is concerned. There is always that tyrannical inner authority with the huge work ethic inside telling me, “Be vigilant. There are deadlines ahead. And here are the number of days, hours and minutes until D-day arrives. It won't be possible for you to enjoy anything until it's all done.”



And so there I was not long ago in the late afternoon of perhaps the most glorious day of the year, weather-wise, taking our little dog, Zoey, here out for a walk around the neighborhood. My head was down, I was grumbling under my breath for this stupid little mutt to hurry up and go so I could get back to my work-out, back to my errands, back to my chores around the house, back to putting final touches on a sermon, back to catching up on some reading...

While in this, “There is not enough time” state, I could remember seeing no one – even though afterwards, some part of me realized with shame that I had passed several of my neighbors, with a demeanor that dared them to speak to me.



So, on a day where the air was fresh and crisp, and the sky as deep blue and clear as it ever gets – I could see nothing past my current obligations. And so, I felt heavily burdened.

But the burden I carried was not my obligations; it was my attitude toward my obligations. Though the sun was shining, and grace was all around, some part of me was choosing to remain in a place that was dark and gray – far removed from any whiff of the kingdom.



Now mind you, one could argue that everything I was obliged to accomplish on my list was indeed for others and for God. But what good was that really, in the agitated state I was in.

I confess all of this today because my guess is that my experience has a familiar ring to many of you who are here today.



But I confess all of this *also* because I believe it is exactly the same attitude that was carried by nine of the ten lepers who came to Jesus for relief from *their* own dis-ease.

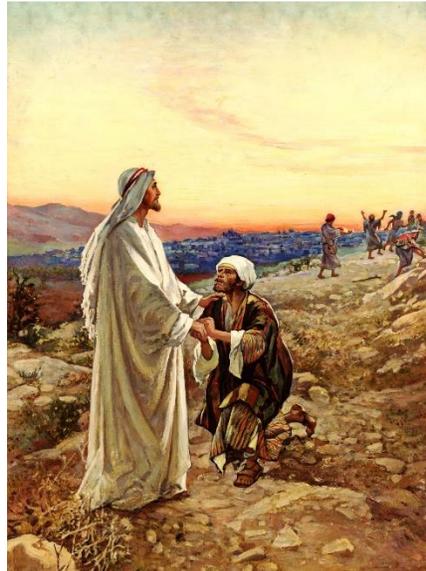
“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us,” They cry.

And what does Jesus tell them?

“Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Right? “Go to the Priests.” According to the scriptures, once declared *unclean* by way of disease, defilement, or moral failure, only a priest could declare one clean again. It is interesting that here Jesus does not heal the Lepers right away. They are healed not in front of Jesus but on their way to see the priests.

Now it is worth noting that Jesus, at this point in his ministry, would have carried the authority of a rabbi or a prophet, which would have been equal to that of a priest. We also need to remember that in first century Palestine, the term “leprosy” was a broad term that could be applied to anything from eczema to the horrible Hansen’s disease where body parts eventually die and fall off. So, the term would have been applied subjectively depending on the community and depending on the priest. What this means is that at least initially all the Lepers are doing is following the advice of one authority figure, that is Jesus that this time when they go to the

priests their skin disease will be declared one that is no longer considered unclean. A cure was probably not what any of them were expecting and may not have been something that they even noticed until much later. They are on a mission – to go to the priests – to make their way through the religious bureaucracy that will likely take all day. Their mind and hearts are set with laser-like focus in one particular direction and because of this, they miss out on the grace and the healing that is present right now.



Luke says that as they went, the lepers were made clean or healed. Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say that the lepers *realized* they were healed. Luke says simply, in fact, that they were. We can deduce from this, then, that it is only the Samaritan who realizes it – the Samaritan – the one, by the way, that observant Jews thought of as rather lazy in their approach to the sovereign authority of God.

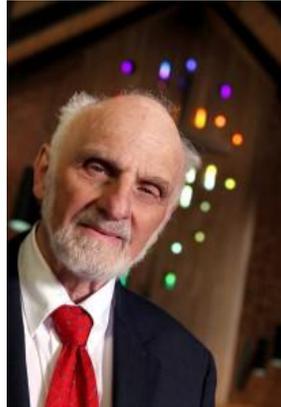
Meanwhile, the other nine continue on with heads down grumbling under their breath toward the temple and the priests. And from there we can only guess that these other nine with their proper biblical work ethic went the rest of their lives working hard to get back into the good graces of God through the ministrations and declarations of their community when, in fact, it had already happened.

Luke makes it clear to us, that it was only the one who recognized the Grace of God in the healing and acted immediately with eternal gratitude. It is also the commentary of Luke that he therefore was the only one who was actually made whole as the last words of Jesus uttered to him are:

“Go now and live fully for your faith (that is your recognition of and trust in God's grace) has made you well.”

All ten may have been cured of their leprosy but there was only one that was made well – the one who recognized and made room for the Grace of God by returning with thanks. The clear message of the story is that, in spite of their physical healing, the nine that did not return

remained un-well. In spite of the abundant miracle before them, they remained stuck in an attitude of life's scarcity where one had to continually work hard to earn one's life before God and God's community.



Walter Brueggemann, professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, sees this as a recurring theme throughout the bible – what he calls, the conflict between the “liturgy of abundance” and the “myth of scarcity.”

He reminds us that the Bible starts out in Genesis 1 with a liturgy declaring God's abundant blessing on all creation. At the end of each day God declares that day's work *to be* “good.” It is not until we get to Genesis 47 that we encounter scarcity. It is only then, that Pharaoh organizes a plan to hoard food for a coming famine. God shows what God thinks of Pharaoh's ways when, even in the wilderness, God provides Israel with the manna from heaven and all hoarded food quickly rots.



But unable to hoard, the people are frequently fearful that there will not be enough.

Brueggemann sees us Americans functioning in the world today much the way Pharaoh and his infectious attitude towards the world's natural resources did in Genesis. We, the richest people of the world, are the main coveters. “We never feel that we have enough,” says Brueggemann. “We have to work to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity — a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity. —religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533. Retrieved December 6, 2006.

So, back to my time with Zoey.



At some point, I caught myself. I heard that voice telling me that I didn't have enough time to do all I had to do. So, I stopped for a moment, closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to live, just for that moment into the very opposite.



I imagined a childhood best friend, who, thinking back, was most probably a stand-in for Christ, I imagined that best friend with his arm around me telling me "Don't worry Michael, you have plenty of time. What you need to get done will get done and all will be well. Whether you do or you don't, you are loved. Relax and enjoy this moment with me – now."

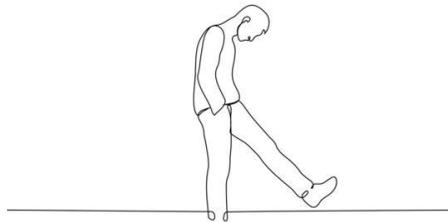


Well, I have got to say that I was amazed at the change. I looked up. I must have been smiling, because now I could see people and they were smiling. The air suddenly seemed fresher. I could see that blue sky above and it was absolutely spectacular.



In a flash, I was thankful for Zoey, without whom, I would not have gotten outside in the first place. A new perspective on the tasks I had before me was allowing me to enjoy this wonderful time of year. Like that tenth leper, a part of me had suddenly returned. I had found a way to make room for grace.

Now it came at a price – the sacrifice of a very dependable attitude that has always served me very well – in terms of getting the job done –



“Keep your head down and keep working. You won’t be able to enjoy life until it is all done.” And I have to admit – that’s scary. As irrational as it is, that part of me wants me to believe that it will all come tumbling down if I stop.

But not only is that an unrealistic burden, it also causes me to be rather dismissive toward people with a more *laize faire* approach to life. And that’s the problem. The attitude of scarcity whether it is of time or of material resources creates a demeanor of Judgment which, in turn creates an atmosphere of justified punishment, if not literally, against an individual, then at least inwardly against myself and against the source of life that is God.

Thus, making room for a more abundant, live and let live attitude can be the difference between really living and, well, not living at all...

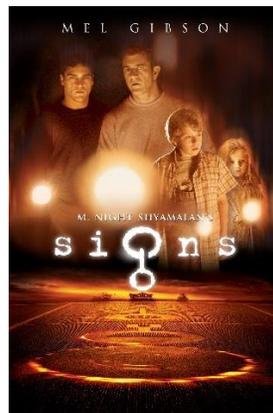
It was not the disease that was the obstacle standing in the way of God’s fully lived presence in the lives of those lepers but their attitude toward the disease. All ten were healed. Only *one* allowed the Grace of God from this apparent miracle to reach his soul.

It wasn’t Zoey who was the problem, it was me. Rather than me being *with* the source of life, everything about life felt like it was in my way. But as soon as I contacted that “never enough”

voice, I was able to relax and allow it to be replaced by its opposite – the voice of the inner friend, Christ, saying – you have all you need.



M. Night Shyamalan sums this up beautifully in a somewhat different way in his film, *Signs*. You remember the movie.

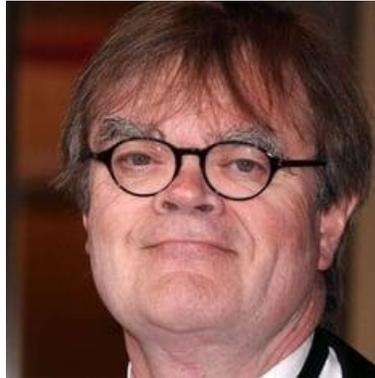


It looks as though Aliens have made their way to earth and a priest played by Mel Gibson and his brother, played by Joaquin Phoenix, are watching the TV as all this unfolds. The character played by Phoenix is afraid, so his brother, the priest, played by Gibson tells him this. He says:



“There are all different ways you can tell that there’s someone really there watching out for us. You see signs. Sometimes they’re little ones. You think of someone. The phone rings. They’re on the phone. ... Sometimes they’re big, like 14 lights hovering over Mexico City. ... Sure, there

are a lot of people watching this who think this could be a bad thing. But there are a lot of people watching this who think it's a miracle. A sign of God's existence. It's all in how you look at things. ... What you have to decide is what kind of person you are. Are you the type who believes in miracles and looks for signs, or are you the kind who believes things just happen by chance?" Indeed.



Finally, I leave it to Garrison Keillor to advise us on how this is done. He says: "To know and to serve God, of course, is why we're here, a clear truth that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on it hard. But a little faith will see you through. ... When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word. What is the last word then? Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids – all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through. Garrison Keillor, *On the Meaning of Life*, in *We Are Still Married* (New York: Viking, 1989), as quoted in Tim Dearborn, *Taste & See: Awakening Our Spiritual Senses* (Downers Grove: Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 71.

Trinity is one such place and so, Janet and I plan on returning to express our gratitude to God by committing our God-given resources to its ministry and mission. I hope you will do the same.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, at those very moments when we believe that there is no way we are going to make it because we don't have enough, help us to find a way through haze of that attitude of harsh judgement against ourselves and others. Help us instead, to see clearly where the gravy soaks in and the grace shines through. Amen