

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then 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. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

We are reaching that time of year when we begin to plan for upcoming holidays, and that time when we reminisce about holidays past. Many of my friends talk about their families' Thanksgiving traditions growing up. Often they pretend to dread (or possibly really dread) the yearly ritual of going around the table and saying what they are thankful for...while the food on their plates gets cold. In my family, we were too many to all sit comfortably at my grandparents' dining room table, and we often found ourselves perched on whatever couch or chair was closest to the conversation we most wanted to hear. We were lucky if the entire clan was quiet enough to hear my grandfather say grace, and we all wished he'd just hurry up already. It wasn't to say we weren't grateful for things. It was just that we never made a habit of it.

As I have thought about these men in today's Scripture, men exiled from the community as the result of their disease, I am fascinated by Jesus' incredulity that only one returned. They had been deemed by their communities as unclean, and they were in land that was between Samaria and Galilee, neither here nor there, where "in" and "out" was even less predictable. These men were marginalized in more ways than one and were communing together perhaps out of necessity, by virtue of being exiled from their respective communities. Presenting themselves to the priests was the act by which these men could be reinstated in their community. It wasn't the act by which they were healed. It was the act by which they were gathered back in. After who knows how long living outside the bounds of society, they seized the opportunity to be brought back into the fold. Surely Jesus understood that.

Surely we understand that, we who have experienced our own exiles, even our self-imposed ones. Sometimes we can't go home, and sometimes we don't want to go home. But sometimes, we have an opportunity to reclaim a community, and our desire to be reinstated and deemed okay overrides our good manners or our better selves. But the one, that lone Samaritan, he couldn't help himself. He was overwhelmed with gratitude and had to give thanks, to Jesus, to God. What prompted the one to return when the other nine did not?

It would be so deliciously easy to judge the ones who didn't turn back. What ingrates! But I've heard friends in 12-step groups caution against the effects of negative thinking, the disease of comparison in which we ask "Am I okay?" and gauge our worth against the accomplishments of others. Am I smart enough, pretty enough, spiritual enough? That person does everything better than I do.... Lest I fall into such a trap, I feel the need to guard against judging those who didn't turn back. Jesus said to the one who returned, "Your faith made you well." But the passage says that all ten were made well, and all ten had faith enough to call out to Jesus in the first place. Maybe they felt that as Galileans, the chosen ones, it was their right to take their healing as it came. Maybe it only occurred to the foreigner that something truly grace-filled had happened. Maybe when we feel most exiled is when we cling most tightly to every kindness...or maybe in exile is when we are free to let go of the belief structures that don't work for us, free to attune ourselves to breath of God in ways that feel authentic to us.

When I was a teenager, I kept a journal, and every day I wrote down my thoughts and feelings, and then I made two lists, one of moments from the day I was thankful for and one of people I was thankful for. It seemed kind of silly, but it helped me keep perspective. Even now, sometimes I go back and make those lists. It's how I remember to notice the goodness and the many gifts in my life. It has long felt spiritually healing to make gratitude a regular practice. But I was surprised to learn that in addition to More joy, optimism, and happiness; Acting with more generosity and compassion; and

Feeling less lonely and isolated, there is some research suggesting that a practice of gratitude can lead to physical healing as well, such as stronger immune systems and lower blood pressure (All according to The Expanding Gratitude Project, <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/expandinggratitude>).

Last week, Laura Ruth talked about extracting faith from belief. She said faith is something we do, it's a practice. Gratitude, likewise, is a practice. I want to distinguish between the practice of faith and the practice of gratitude, and the difference is this: gratitude is an *expression* of the life of faith. It is one among many ways we can live our faith, one of countless practices that attempt to align our hearts with the heart of the Divine. But if faith is a practice rather than a simple set of beliefs, then there are many ways of leaning into that sense of trust, many ways of being a faithful questioner, many ways of expressing what it is to turn over to God the things that prevent us from being our most glorious selves. At the retreat, my small group talked about the root of the word Eucharist, another word for what we call Communion, which is the Greek word for "Thanksgiving." We practice faith here, and we practice gratitude here. All ten men were healed in today's Scripture. But there is something different about the one who stopped, who took the time to turn back and to give thanks. Likewise, we practice seeing the world differently, because we believe it makes a difference to be grateful, to be moved, to be attuned to the gifts of God in our lives.

Over the past few weeks, this Mary Oliver poem has been on my mind. It is a source of comfort and inspiration for me, and its words and phrases float around and bubble up for me often.

Heavy

That time
I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying

I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had His hand in this,

as well as friends.
Still, I was bent,
and my laughter,
as the poets said,

was nowhere to be found.
Then said my friend Daniel
(brave even among lions),
"It's not the weight you carry

but how you carry it—
books, bricks, grief—
it's all in the way

you embrace it, balance it, carry it
when you cannot, and would not,
put it down."
So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?

Have you heard
the laughter
that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled—
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love
to which there is no reply?

Mary Oliver says, "And so I went practicing, have you noticed?...How I linger to admire, admire, admire..." Our work, of finding the heart of God as we wade through the grief, fear, and uncertainty life throws our way, is the work of resilience. A spiritual advisor told me recently that part of why we develop spiritual practices is to build up our emotional/spiritual bank accounts. When we learn to notice, to admire, to find gratitude, we reorient ourselves and build up our reserves. But it's a countercultural practice, this building a muscle for gratitude, for admiration, for noticing what's right instead of what's wrong. That only one of ten healed came back to give thanks sounds like a measly investment return, but the idea that we could remember to notice and be grateful one in ten times sounds like a fine place to start.

My family of origin never made a habit of expressing gratitude aloud. But my family of faith did. This family of faith does. We go practicing, we linger over the gift of being together, the gift of knowing that we were made for glory despite being human and doing the best we can. We practice our gratitude

together and remind each other of our belovedness, and even in our brokenness, we find healing. I, for one, am grateful. Amen.