

Psalm 66:1-12
Luke 17:11-19

SPACIOUS LIVING

When Rudyard Kipling was writing stories at his prime, it was reported that for his newspaper work, he received fifty cents for every word he wrote. Some students at Oxford University, less impressed with this success than they might have been, sent Kipling fifty cents with this request: "Please send us back one of your very best words." Immediately, Kipling sent a cable to the students with a one-word message: "THANKS!"

Thanks-giving and the expression of gratitude are at the heart of the Gospel lesson this week. Here in this scripture passage, we hear about the "other Samaritan." The first one was a fictional character in a parable that Jesus told in which the Samaritan hero shows mercy and helps his Jewish neighbor in need. But, the Samaritan in today's lesson is a real live person, and his encounter with Jesus is held up to us as a model of faith.

We know this story. It comes around every third year on the lectionary cycle and it might make a guest appearance at a community Thanksgiving service because of its emphasis on giving thanks for blessings received. We are familiar with the ten lepers, who called out as Jesus approached them, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" and he did. He told them to go and present themselves to the priests, and they did. On the way, the lepers were healed of their disease. Nine of them continued on in the direction of the priests, for they were required by the Law to obtain proper documentation that they were clean and to get authorized permission to live within the community again. Nine of them kept going, but one did not.

I imagine that, in time, this other "former leper," the Samaritan in the bunch, eventually made his way to the priests and received the proper clearance, which would restore him to the community once more. However, for the time being, he had something more important to do. He made a U-turn and headed straight for Jesus. He came back, shouting his gratitude and glorifying God. He knelt at Jesus' feet because he was so thankful; in fact, he couldn't thank Jesus enough! Jesus said aloud to the cured Samaritan and to his disciples standing near by, "Weren't ten persons healed? What happened to the other nine? Isn't it interesting that only one has come back to give praise to God and that one is an outsider?" Then Jesus said to the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

There are two important items to note about this passage of Scripture. First of all, as with Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, those within earshot of Jesus' voice were probably shocked to hear Jesus praising yet another Samaritan. After all, the Jews looked with contempt upon the Samaritans. Samaria was the capital of the northern Israelite kingdom that was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. In time, people from the lands the Assyrians had conquered repopulated the area; these foreigners, in turn, mixed with the Jews who had remained there. Thus, proper Jews in and around Jerusalem and Judea looked down upon their Samaritan cousins, who had intermingled with Gentiles and were considered to be unclean and were to be avoided at all costs.

However, Jesus' words and actions, along with Luke's recording of this encounter, state emphatically that that kind of thinking was wrong! The kingdom of God is now here in Jesus Christ, and the grace of God is available to all people, which includes not only the Jews, but Samaritans and Gentiles as well! You can almost hear the collective gasp rise up from Jesus' and Luke's combined audience.

This scripture lesson prompts us to stop and ask our selves, “Who are the present-day Samaritans in our culture? What group of people do we look down upon or think less of from our vantage point? Do illegal aliens come to mind or persons of a different race or nationality from our own? What about persons whose orientation, behavior, dress or speech is different from ours? How about Muslims or some others whose religion or political philosophy differ from ours? If you read the papers or listen to political spin on TV, today’s Samaritan could be those liberal, peace-loving Democrats or those hawkish Republicans. Who are Samaritans to us?”

Then, after asking those questions, be sure to realize that, whatever answers we came up with, they are the wrong answers if we take Jesus seriously! The Gospel proclaims that God loves everyone, and we are to love God and our neighbor in return. In our better moments, we remember, “God so loved the world that God gave the Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Furthermore, as children we were taught to sing, “Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the children of the world,” and yet, somehow, we have allowed our culture to get inside of our minds to the point where we divide and determine who’s in and who is out, who belongs and who doesn’t.

Be very careful about that kind of dangerous thinking for as the prophet Isaiah reminds us, God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, “nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8). God loves us all, and all of us are God’s children, which, in turn makes all people our sisters and brothers – by the grace of God!

I said earlier that there are two important items to note about this passage. Secondly, notice that while all ten lepers were healed, only the one who returned, praising and glorifying God and thanking Jesus profusely was told to “Go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Or another way of translating the Greek is to say: “Your faith has saved you”. All ten were healed physically of their leprosy but only one was made well or saved spiritually. Why?

All ten lepers obeyed Jesus and, because they did, all were healed. The other nine were surely happy to be cured and so they kept on going to see the priests and be given permission to resume their lives with their families, friends, and the community. However, this other one saw beyond the gift of his healing to the Giver of grace. While he too would eventually go and see the priests, it was far more important to him to turn back and say, “Thank you!” to the One who was not only the Source of his healing but also the very One who gave him life in the first place and then gave him his life back again, the One who saved him.

The word for salvation has as its root meaning the sense of “broadening” or “enlarging,” the creation of space. We tend to think of this in terms of heaven; after all, Jesus said, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms” – plenty of space, room enough for all. However, the concept of salvation for Luke is very physical in relation to God’s good purposes; and, for Luke, God’s salvation or reign is at work in the present, in the here and now.

In Psalm 66, the psalmist calls the people to “Make a joyful noise to God... sing the glory of God’s name, give to God glorious praise.” The psalmist remembers how Yahweh brought the Israelites (out of Egypt) – God turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. And even though there were trials and tests along the way – “we went through fire and through water – yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.” You can hear in that psalm, the salvation of the Lord, who not only saved the chosen people from the Egyptians but also delivered them into a spacious land where they would be free to stretch and grow and enjoy God’s goodness.

Likewise, all ten lepers were healed, which gave them the freedom to move from the outskirts of town to be with their loved ones again. And yet, the Samaritan in the group was saved, which is to say his vision was enlarged to see not only the gift but also the Giver, and his experience was broadened as he returned to Jesus and entered into a loving relationship with the Lord. In following Jesus, the Samaritan's life became richer and more fulfilled.

This text invites us to love and praise God, through Jesus the Son, and, when we do, we enter into a spacious life that keeps on expanding. Let me give you some examples of what it means to be saved and to enjoy spacious living.

When we feel wronged by others, we can withdraw from them; we turn away from them, turn in upon ourselves, and nurture our wound. Or, as Christians, we can pray about the problem; we can go and seek to be reconciled to them. If both parties are willing to forgive and be rejoined in the Lord then life is restored and may even get better because the friendship has been tested and has grown even stronger. When we forgive, or when we live without prejudices, we enter into spacious living.

A certain woman goes to Haiti every year to work for two weeks in a church sponsored clinic there. When a minister praised her for going to help the poor in Haiti she corrected him: "I go there to restore my faith. Their strong, vibrant, faith shames my spiritual weakness. They give me more than I give them." How often have we served in the name of Jesus Christ and found that we received far more than we ever gave in the first place? That's what it means to be saved and to enjoy spacious living.

A man was on vacation with his son's family at a rented cottage on the New England seashore. The first day the man was out in the yard digging a hole for a small plant. The son asked his Dad why he was going to such effort to put out a plant when this wasn't even their cottage, and they wouldn't be returning the next year. The father replied, "Somebody will be here." "What kind of plant is it?" the son asked. "A century plant," his father replied. "A century plant? You mean it won't bloom for a hundred years?" the son asked. "Not that long," the father explained. "Maybe twenty or thirty years." The boy was astonished. "Why in the world would you come out on this hot morning on your vacation in a rented cottage to put out a plant that won't even bloom for twenty years?" The father paused and looked up at his son. "I saw one the other day, and realized that someone twenty or thirty years ago wanted to share it with me. And so he planted it for my enjoyment. Some day, I said to myself, I'm going to plant one so that people will enjoy it after I'm gone. And that's what I'm doing this morning." Besides being a great story about the stewardship of one's own life, that story also speaks volumes about salvation – when we live to serve others, we experience spacious living.

Todd was told by the doctors that there was nothing more they could do for him. Todd resolved to go on a spiritual journey to Yugoslavia to a place known for its miraculous cures; he was confident that he would be healed. Some months passed before Todd was back in the hospital. He told the chaplain about his trip to Yugoslavia and how late one evening, as Todd lay awake, he suddenly realized that there would be no miracle. Instead of weeping in rage, Todd felt a strange sense of peace and comfort wash over him. He told the chaplain, "Don't get me wrong, there are days when I am scared and angry at not being able to see my kids have children... I don't know why I wasn't cured, but I have never been so grateful for my life, my family, and my church. I really believe a miracle took place on that trip." At the end of the story the chaplain writes: We both cried our goodbyes. I am thankful for Todd, for our chats, and most grateful that in his faith he found peace, comfort, and, I would include, healing. I think

Christ would have said, ‘Todd, your faith has made you well.’” (Ryan LaMothe, Lectionary Homiletics, Oct. 2004, p. 20)

In the Gospel lesson and in those stories I hope you can hear what spacious living (or salvation) is all about. As we live with gratitude, not just for all the gifts we have received but even more for God, who is the Giver of every good and perfect gift, I hope we will taste the rich, full, ever-expanding life God desires to give us. Then, we can say along with the psalmist: “You, O Lord, have brought us out to a spacious place,” and with the Samaritan we can praise God with every ounce of our being – now and forever more. Amen.

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