

**Sermon: Where the Body and Spirit Meet****Scripture: Luke 17:11-19****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 10, 2010**

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Last week we read in Luke chapter 17 where Jesus says if someone offends you confront them and if they repent forgive them and if they do it again confront and forgive them again and do this again and again if they keep doing it. In other words it's not merely that you need to work on your capacity to forgive but you need to live with posture of forgiveness. And the disciples are daunted by this and say – “well if that's what you expect then you must increase our faith” to which Jesus responds “It's not about more faith, if you had any faith at all, the size of a mustard seed let's say what seems impossible to you would be possible. It's not the quantity of faith or even the quality of faith that makes the difference it's just having faith, which in this case faith means an acceptance – or understanding of heart, mind and soul - of the great mercy of God which is not given if we are deserving of it and withheld if we are undeserving of it but rather is offered freely for our taking. And this is good news since most all of us usually find in a week's time if not a days time some pretty good ways to be undeserving, sinful, selfish, mean. If you don't think it's true of yourself then you might want to check in with your spouse or significant other more often around that one. And despite our sinfulness at times the most abundant forgiveness and love is still poured over us in the form of breath and air - life itself - on one level and in the form of divine love on another. And it is with this understanding of heart, mind and soul, of our own “limitedness” and of God's unlimited mercy that we then are expected to be in a posture of forgiveness and love toward others because such is granted to us. Those who have not sinned may cast the first stone, right? And since we all sin there should be no casting of stones, no violence – bodily, emotional, psychological - toward one another.

And then we are set up quite nicely to hear the next story in chapter 17 of Luke's Gospel which goes like this: Luke 17:11-19

<sup>11</sup>On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, <sup>13</sup>they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” <sup>14</sup>When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. <sup>15</sup>Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup>He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a

Samaritan. <sup>17</sup>Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? <sup>18</sup>Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” <sup>19</sup>Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

It’s a physical healing story first of all and I don’t want to downplay the centrality of that. We tend in our modern age to want to “deal with” such miracle stories in the Gospels as metaphorical stories communicating ideas at best if not superstitious religious beliefs that need to be dismissed in light of what we can scientifically know today. As important as the Enlightenment was it also did a disservice to us in drawing those lines so hard between the facts of science on one side and the beliefs of religion and spirituality on the other. And what this did was to re-introduce a theological problem or heresy, as the ancients called it, where all things physical and measurable are relegated to the realm of science and facts/truth while all things spiritual and immeasurable are relegated to religion and belief, which are suspect, and thus the separation of body and soul was drawn. This separation of materiality from spirituality that the western world endorsed, more than the Judeo-Christian religion, I’d suggest, is the source of our human abuse of creation; because authentic Christian theology has this persistent insistence that physicality, materiality, creation is at the very center of religious faith and our relationship with God. That’s what we are saying when we maintain that Jesus was fully human and fully divine and that’s the direction we are pointing when we speak of the mystery of resurrection and that critical wholeness of creation and spirit is what we lose sight of when we relegate the material realm to science and the disembodied spiritual realm to religion.

Someone who doesn’t attend this church came last week and heard me sharing openly about my personal struggle and the struggles that I sense in our congregation right now and wrote a thoughtful email to me. But he ended the email in assessing our situation by saying – “it’s all about quickening Christ Consciousness in each one of us and so steeples and church buildings are off the point.” But there he revealed a particular theology which on this point is at odds with Christian theology, because we do not and cannot separate out the physical from the spiritual. Certain Eastern or New Age spiritualities might say it’s all about developing individual Christ consciousness and I honor that viewpoint, but Christian spirituality says our spirits cannot be divorced from our bodies; the physical and the spiritual are of a piece. And so, I respectfully disagree

that steeples on church buildings are off the point. It's actually very much the point. Our steeple rushing upwards towards the heavens is the physical representation, the material manifestation, of the spiritual reality of our church community. It is painful not to have a steeple on this building and that pain is not beside the point nor is it a misunderstanding of what the church is about. The steeple is the very thing that says to the world and reminds us – we are not a humanist organization (the horizontal), here, just doing things that our community decides to do but rather we are in relationship with the divine (the vertical), with God, symbolically represented in the heavens towards which our steeple points. It is not me as the pastor nor is it us together as the community that is in charge of things here but we are a community under God, with Christ as our head. Therefore I believe that where we are right now physically, as a steeple-less church, is the material manifestation of us spiritually as well and that in my estimation our steeple-less church is a huge invitation from God to work on getting back into alignment with the One within whom we live, move, and have our being. It is a stark physical reminder that we are not who we are yet called to be, we are not truly CHURCH unless we are held together in Spirit and holding ourselves in allegiance and obedience to God and God's purposes for us and the world - *as best as we can figure God's purposes, always acknowledging that we can never determine that 100%!*

Personally, as your pastor, I hesitate to RUSH to get that steeple back on because I think it speaks of a deeper spiritual reality that we are being invited into, because I think it is a reminder, an invitation, to get back in touch with who we are and what we are fundamentally about. And then I think, when we have done sufficient spiritual work the replacing of the steeple will come naturally and beautifully along with untold other fruit. That is my belief. So the steeple, in my estimation, is very much the point.

Now how is this related to our scripture this morning and the healing of 10 lepers? Jesus' physical healing of them is one part of the story but there is also deeper healing that is going on in Luke's telling of this story. Of the 10 lepers healed only one praises God and comes back to give thanks to Jesus for being an instrument of God's healing power and that one leper is a Samaritan, the ancient enemy group of the Jews living in Palestine at the time. The deeper healing that is going on, and that would be quite a shock to the hearers of this gospel, is a healing of nations, a breaking down of traditional lines of the pure and the impure, the righteous and the unrighteous, the people on the

inside and the excluded ones on the outside, the rival and the friend. The physical ailment of leprosy represents a deeper ailment of society that defines people in categories where some are winners and others are losers; a societal ailment that is a diseased denial of our fundamental unity as children of God. And it's the enemy outsider that holds the lesson that we the privileged insiders need to learn for our own good.

Along with a need for us to live with a posture of forgiveness towards others comes the need for us to live with an attitude of gratitude to God. I wonder if the other 9 lepers who walked away from Jesus didn't return to give thanks because of something like this: as they walked away they thought "oh, my gosh I think I am healing, I think I am healed!!" and then they thought to themselves – "well, isn't that a coincidence that Jesus told me to go see my priest and here I am healed! That's an amazing coincidence. I think I'm just darn lucky. I wonder if this is the result of the new diet that I put myself on?" Or "I wonder if the disease simply ran its course and now I'm through with it and can get going back into my life?" Maybe they even forgot that they had had that interaction with Jesus, that they had offered up that prayer to God and that it is in fact God to whom they owed their gratitude. All except for the Samaritan who knew where to give credit and thanks.

It's like that joke that I think I told you already but will tell you again that Carolyn shared with Tim and Tim shared with me which goes like this:

Paddy was driving down the street in a sweat because he had an important meeting and couldn't find a parking place. Looking up to heaven he said, "Lord take pity on me. If you find me a parking place I promise I will go to Mass every Sunday for the rest of me life, and I'll even give up drinkin' me Irish whiskey!" Miraculously, a parking place appeared. Paddy looked up again and said, "Oh never mind, I found one."

We need to hold God and God's great mercy front and center of our individual lives and in our corporate lives as a church as well. There is so much to be grateful for and though we may be feeling a sense of spiritual lack and malaise right now in our steeple-less church and though we may be feeling a similar sense in our nation and world at large and though the earth itself groans and suffers right now to some extent as the physical material manifestation of a deeper spiritual disease and dis-ease in the human race, we as a people of faith, I believe, need to hear it all as a call to place God back at the center and we need to watch for the healing on many levels that will take place as a

result and approach it all with gratitude for this most amazing and at times difficult gift that is life together on this planet as children of an amazingly loving Creator!