

RCL YEAR C, PROPER TWENTY-THREE, October 14th, 2007
 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Psalm 111; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; St. Luke 17:11-19
 St. Edmund's Episcopal Church; Stewardship Sunday
 The Reverend George F. Woodward III

Today marks the launch of our annual Stewardship Season where we ask you to support the annual church budget from the heart and moving toward the biblical tithe.

In a certain farm community a chicken and a pig were discussing their involvement in the church. They debated on how they could help the stewardship drive, and they finally decided to get personally involved and put on a big church breakfast. The chicken suggested serving ham and eggs, but the pig lobbied for pancakes. The chicken insisted ham and eggs was a bigger draw. "*Well that's fine for you,*" said the pig, "*but for me it means a total commitment!*" We can hope for one another a total commitment to Christ that means engaged mission and ministry at St. Edmunds.

I'd like to visit the Isthmus of Panama some day, one of the most important land masses in the world, scientists tell us. About sixty million years ago North America and South America were free-floating entities. When the tiny Isthmus of Panama, 29,000 square miles in all, rose from the sea, it separated a united body of water into two. It created the distinction between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. It changed the world's currents, creating the cold currents off the Atlantic coast of South America in which so much sea-life flourishes, and the warm El Niño flow so crucial to the world's climate. The tiny Isthmus of Panama changed the world when it rose from the sea.

Connections are powerful. For human beings, they are everything. Jesus is in a land between continents in today's story...He is *between* Galilee and Samaria. He encounters a wandering band of lepers who have been rejected by Galileans and Samaritans alike, forced to scabble for subsistence in the garbage dumps on the edges of scattered towns. The term "leprosy" covered any number of skin diseases in ancient Israel, including psoriasis, and the consequences of being diagnosed a leper were harsh indeed. Leviticus 13 tells us the leper shall wear torn clothing and let the hair of his or her head go uncombed. They shall live alone, outside the camp or village, covering their upper lip and crying "unclean, unclean" to anyone within shouting distance. Their social connections were effectively severed. Whereas once they had been set in families, with husbands and wives, sons and daughters, parents and grandparents, and friends, in one summary judgment they found themselves pariahs and apart.

Jesus is often found in these peculiar places beyond understood borders, in the Decapolis and Syrophonecia and in the borderlands beyond cultural and theological approval, talking to Samaritan women, tax collectors, and political zealots. His ministry is about building isthmuses between people and the God they have lost, and building isthmuses between people who have cut themselves off from each other. He never merely heals the body...nearly all of His healings are also about social restoration.

But the focus is less on Jesus today than on the choices made by the ten lepers. That these lepers are not immediately healed places the spotlight on the decisions they make following their encounter with Jesus. They all respond to Jesus' promise of healing. They all set off as He instructs, but it is only *along the way* that they are healed.

Perhaps more than in most healing stories we can find ourselves in this one. The ten folk with the skin disorders "*keep their distance from Jesus.*" They do so because

they have been instructed to keep their distance from everyone, and they don't imagine Jesus is any different, but they do so, too, from a sense of shame, a desire not to reveal too much of themselves. We, too, keep a distance from Jesus because of our cultural understandings. We imagine that to be close to Jesus is to be a fanatic, a Bible-thumper, an intolerant fundamentalist. Or we imagine that to draw close to Jesus is to lose our independence, to manifest weakness, to become so heavenly-minded we are no earthly good. We may be willing to listen to His counsel, at least when the chips are down, and even to do as He instructs, but we shy away from intimacy with God in Christ. It is sometimes only along life's road that we experience something like a spiritual healing, a conversion that establishes an overt relationship with God. Often we realize that conversion began long ago, in our first encounter with Jesus. We discover a relationship with God is not at all as we had imagined, and we can tell our own stories, just as those lepers could, of initial ambivalence and fear in the face of God's relentless love and mercy.

I think sometimes when I see one of the several Alcoholics Anonymous groups that meet on our campus of those in our midst who have come to grips with their own alcoholism. That is no easy thing to do, and often entails a long process. The alcohol-dependant sometimes keep a distance from Jesus because they are afraid of what proximity to Jesus might mean for their drinking habits. Only along the road, once they have given up drinking and have seen the dawn of healing and the lifting of the fog do they come to understand that Christ has been at work with them all along, even as they tried to keep Him at arms length.

Those lepers were accustomed to being overlooked and relegated to the fringes, out of sight and mind for most people. But Jesus *sees* them in their existential condition and in their social isolation. He begins with them just as they are, and healing slowly emerges. He sees each of us for who we are, and He sees our full potential.

In John Bunyan's classic allegorical novel "*Pilgrim's Progress*" the pilgrim named Christian arrives at the Wicket Gate, and, pausing on his journey, he complains about a burden on his back which he still carries, despite having set out on the pilgrim's road. Christian is representative of everyone who has made a Christian commitment yet and wondered why life grew no easier in consequence! His host replies, "*As to the burden, be content to bear it, until thou comest to the place of deliverance, for there it will fall from thy back itself.*" And further along on his journey, that is what happens for Christian. The Gospel doesn't heal us all at once; it commands us down a path where healing overtakes us a little at a time.

So the lepers set out as Jesus commanded. They are off to present themselves to the priests who alone can declare them clean and allow them to return to their villages. The lepers run to get certified and to have their membership privileges reinstated. They run to see if any family has waited for them, or if the tennis club will have them back.

Except one. One turns around, "*praising God with a loud voice.*" He prostrates himself at Jesus' feet, and thanked Him. The Greek word used here for "thanked" is *euchariston*. One in ten returned and made Eucharist...maybe about the proportion we see coming to Church to make Eucharist! One in ten returned.

And that one was a Samaritan, Jesus said. Someone beyond the pale, disliked and unexpected. And that one was a Muslim. And that one was a Mexican. Fill in the blank with some category of person you don't much resonate with.

Our Stewardship theme this year is “Whole Life Stewardship” because Brian Spaulding our Stewardship Chair, and Kathy Sweeney who is involved in stewardship efforts, and all the Vestry want to emphasize that stewardship is about much more than money. It is silly to talk about tithing apart from talking about an entire life dedicated to God, a fundamental commitment to walking in the way of Christ.

Christians want to talk about stewardship differently than National Public Radio talks about program support. KPCC public radio here in Pasadena is currently conducting one of their quarterly funding campaigns. They harangue their listeners, and not inappropriately, to contribute because of what they receive. It works. I give. But not in the same spirit with which I give to my Church, which has a different kind of claim on me.

The Mormons, I’m embarrassed to say, probably have more to teach us about the meaning of stewardship. Jana Riess, a convert to Mormonism, wrote an article in the most recent issue of the Christian Century magazine in which she claims that Mormonism is a legitimate branch of the Christian religion. While I disagree with her claim, her reasons for becoming a Mormon were compelling. *“Sometime Protestants,”* she writes, *“look at the energy of Mormonism and wonder what we have that’s so darn appealing. Here is one thing that is attractive: high expectations. I graduated from a Protestant seminary, and I see my pastor friends shouldering tremendous burdens for everyone and everything. In the LDS Church, each individual has a job to do, from teaching a particular class or organizing lay visitation to coordinating the youth programs or running the library.”* I can tell you this pastor’s pulse quickened to that part of Jana Riess’s description of why Mormonism is growing. She goes on to write: *“Protestant churches should give members more explicitly outlined responsibilities, so the same 10 percent of congregants don’t wind up doing 90 percent of the work. Protestant churchgoers should not just be gently encouraged to donate what they feel comfortable giving, but should be taught to work up to giving a full tithe. Youth should be offered a distinctive Christian identity based on regular practices of devotion and sacrifice: they need to know that God makes daily demands on their time, money and talents.”* I think that is one Mormon who has something prophetic to say to St. Edmund’s Church.

I know plenty of people, and perhaps you do too, who have received an unsettling medical diagnosis. Some of those folk, through remarkable medical treatments, go on to receive a reprieve, or even a cure. It is always fascinating to see what happens with these lucky ones. Some pick up their lives right where they left off, and are happy to get matters back to normal. But others are ever after marked by a new awareness of the brevity of life. Their attitudes change. Each day seems a remarkable gift. They have learned what all of us ought to know: that life is on lease, and we are tenants, not owners. Those who have received a second chance know that our stay on earth is limited, and the time for living, for gratitude, for relationships, is now.

Christians, through Christ, have a new lease on life, a restored perspective that Christ’s death for us means a different way of living in the present.

When the Samaritan returns and offers praise and Eucharist, Jesus calls it “Faith.” *“Your Faith has made you well,”* He says to the man. Wholeness and wellness and stewardship, are rooted in gratitude, in praise to God, in Eucharistic thanksgiving. It is a

transformation of perspective that enables us to offer an oblation of ourselves, our lives and labors, to God Almighty to whom we owe everything.

Gratitude is the isthmus of the Christian life, connecting us to God and to others. It is a powerful, transformative force that can change more of the world than we well understand. Christ would raise an isthmus of connection for us between ourselves and God, our parish church, and those we are meant to touch. Wherever you are, in the mainstream or in the borderlands, Christ calls to you. He sees you as you are, and loves you, and bids you move into the transformation that He intends for you. You may choose, as those ten lepers did, to engage the journey and receive the gift of healing and change, and you may choose also, as the Samaritan alone chose, to be grateful. Amen.
GFW+