



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 18 – Proper 23 Year C

How to Receive Grace

[RCL]: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 or 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Psalm 66:1-11 or 111; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

Let us pray: Gracious God, help us to respond affirmatively to the foreigners in our midst. Grant us the grace to accept your healing power and show us how to extend your love and consolation to others. In your most holy name, we pray. Amen.

Healing and compassion are two things that Jesus extended to people everywhere he went as he traveled toward Jerusalem. As he was on the road toward Samaria and Galilee, he encountered a group of folks afflicted with leprosy. It was readily apparent that they were different, for they were specifically identified by their illness. They were simply called lepers.

What is leprosy, you ask? It is a chronic, infectious skin disease that over time can be quite disfiguring. It has been described as a disease dreaded during the time of Jesus and his disciples, not because it killed people, but because people remained alive without any hope. It should also be mentioned that leprosy as discussed in the Bible was a variation of the disease that is present in contemporary society.

As Jesus was walking toward the end of his personal journey, this group of ten who were banded together yelled out for a miracle. They were the true outcasts of society. Their appearance would cause them to be shunned by other members of the community. From a distance, the lepers raised their collective voices to appeal to Christ. They begged for mercy. They needed some relief. Jesus was moved by them and he sent them to see their priests. Immediately as they turned to walk away, they were healed. At that moment, they received two gifts. First, they were cured by Our Lord; second, they were able to resume normal lives among their families and friends. The road leading back to society is often fraught with great difficulty. Sometimes it is impossible to go home again. However long the duration, it is always a hardship and it speaks volumes about those who have turned their backs on their fellow neighbors.

This was not the first time that Jesus was asked to cure someone afflicted with leprosy; in the fifth chapter of Luke, a man threw himself at Jesus' feet pleading for healing. In that instance, Jesus touched him, and he was healed. There is at least one significant difference between these instances: of the ten, only one immediately upon being healed praised God. Jesus wants the reader to know that the grateful person was not only afflicted with a debilitating illness but was also a foreigner. Until that point in the story, Jesus

makes no distinction between all the lepers in the region of Samaria and Galilee who turned to him for help. Everyone in that group who asked for help received assistance from him. Only after the requested cure was granted were more details revealed.

You and I, beloved, must respond to those in our community crying out for help. Jesus is calling on us to respond to his people in the same manner that he did.

Hispanic Heritage Month is celebrated each year from mid-September through Mid-October. It is a time to highlight and recognize outstanding American citizens whose ancestors are from Spanish-speaking countries, including Spain, Mexico, and the regions of South and Central America and the Caribbean. Many organizations host social events to shine a light on the wonderful contributions given by members of the Hispanic community.

Much of this year's celebration has been overshadowed by the continuing predicament of human beings from several Spanish-speaking countries, particularly those in Central America who are desperately trying to seek asylum in the U.S. Thousands of people are currently detained at our southern borders. They are isolated and they are being treated as outcasts. There is a great deal of conversation about whether those people are entitled to humanitarian assistance until their status is fully determined.

Many people who currently reside in the United States find themselves struggling with how to react to the people who are flowing to the border seeking some form of relief. There is a sentiment among some that they ought to be turned away and forced to return to their homelands. In looking at Jesus' response to those who were in need when he was in their region, perhaps we should follow his example: help first, details second. Offering water, food, and medical assistance does not require an abdication of laws. The words of Our Lord will give us guidance to navigate through this difficult terrain.

As faithful followers of Christ, we must ask ourselves how we can show compassion to the foreigners and offer relief from the disease of tyranny. As the hands and feet of Jesus in the land, there must be a response that includes the same manner of kindness extended to the lepers. While the decision of what ultimately happens to asylum-seekers and others is made by public officials, God implores his followers at the least to care for one another while they are here.

This text in the Gospel of Luke fits beautifully with the story of Naaman in the Old Testament lesson. He was also a man who suffered from leprosy. He was a faithful warrior who wanted relief from his terrible illness. The differences in the two stories are really striking; as a commander in the army, Naaman had a staff of servants, and he so sincerely wanted to be cured that he was willing to pay a great deal to the king of Israel if his illness could be reversed. Further, when Naaman was given instructions from Elisha on what he needed to do to be healed of this devastating skin disease, he became incensed. Suddenly, his privilege informed his view that he should be shown more respect by the prophet. He wanted a personal encounter with God through Elisha, so he was doubtful and feared that his trip had been a waste of time. Naaman did not know how to graciously receive the assistance being offered to him. It was his servants, those in a

subservient role to him, who convinced the commander to willingly follow the simple directions that had been given to him by the prophet. In the moment of healing, Naaman recognized God and he fully expressed his gratitude.

Brothers and sisters, grace is not always doled out the way we expect it. For people standing on our shores begging for help, we can separate what our humanity calls us to and what our governance may dictate. Jesus reminds us that our shores may be for them the River Jordan. The Second Letter of Timothy makes it clear that you must “do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15, NRSV).

In truth, let us be willing to graciously extend a hand to the foreigner afflicted with pain and fear and hunger. Let us fearlessly and with open hearts remind them of the love of Jesus who makes no distinction of nationality or clan as he seeks to provide comfort and love to a hurting world. As Jesus cares for all his people – the lepers, the outcasts, and the foreigners – so should we. Our faith tells us that the right decisions will be made in due season. In such acceptance, our faith will make us all well. Amen.

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