

Turn Back
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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2 Timothy 2:8-15

8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, ⁹for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. ¹⁰Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. ¹¹The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; ¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself. 14 Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. ¹⁵Do 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.

Luke 17:11-19

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?’ ¹⁸‘Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ ¹⁹Then he said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’

I know what you’re expecting. You’re expecting the once-a-year give-the-church-your-money sermon. Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you but that’s not in the plans. Yes, today is the big day for our stewardship campaign. But, as I hope you’ve gathered, this isn’t about goading you into giving so we can tick off which bills are paid when. Sure, your financial giving is important for that reason. But, that’s not what this stewardship campaign is about. And that’s why today’s sermon is not the stewardship sermon for which you might have been steeling yourself. You see, this time of giving is about you and God and the many ways in which you give gratitude to God and pledge to be part of bringing this earth a little closer to heaven, that all might be fed, that all might feel loved and cared for. In that case, I hope you’ve been receiving the “stewardship” sermon, a sermon that helps you remember or think about or reimagine how you might show your gratitude toward God, such a stewardship sermon each week so that today is no exception. Why do I stand up here any week? Never to make you feel guilty or shame you. That’s not what Jesus did; I have no right to do that if I am truly trying to bring light to the gospel, to the good news, to share the hope of the teachings and life and death and

resurrection of Jesus, and help us all understand the gospel in our lives. For the Bible is not an old or dead story, but a living word which is just as relevant to us in our time and in our lives as it was to the original hearers. Sometimes it takes a little more effort to make the connections than other times. **That** is why I stand up here – last week, today, into the future.

Today, our reading from Luke seems pretty clear. As always, though, there are nuances and oddly-placed details which we might not pick up on readily. At the start, “Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” There wasn’t some other-named region that sat between them; they shared a border.¹ That means that he was out walking in no-man’s-land, which is why he came across what would have been a leper colony. The lepers were living where no one else would because they could



not live where others would. This is important because it gives greater heft to the significance of what Jesus did for them. We get a bit of a hint of this when we read: “And as they went, they were made clean.” If you remember back to your readings in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, there was much that made someone unclean, leprosy included, which meant they could not enter the temple and make sacrifices to give their thanks to God while unclean, but it also meant they could not come near others if there was risk of making them unclean. Jesus, by bringing healing to them, restored them to life, truly, restored them to life in their own communities.

Now we pick on the nine lepers who did not turn back to give thanks but the fact of the matter is that they were simply following Jesus’ orders and going on to the priests. As a side note, especially knowing the one who turned back was a “foreigner,” this is likely a commentary on those who followed the letter of law instead of the spirit of law, those who did what they read and were taught, ignoring the deeper significances. We also find this kind of commentary in the reading about Jesus healing on the Sabbath and the reading about the disciples picking grain to eat on the Sabbath. What was more important - the Sabbath or taking care of people? The nine who kept on as they were told went to the temple to give thanks to God...instead of going directly to God to give thanks. The Samaritan, who didn’t know what the religious order expected of him, did what felt right since he was unencumbered by rigid rules.

“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.” So what does this mean for us? Can we only relate if we’ve been miraculously healed like the leper? The healing itself is not the key to this account; the restoration to community, to some form of wholeness is the key. That might be more

¹ <http://restlesspilgrim.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/map-of-samaria.gif>

relatable, yes? Perhaps you know personally the experience of being nudged to church by the Holy Spirit when you needed most that connection to God. Or perhaps you know someone for whom this is true. Or maybe restoration was gradual and ongoing. For me, I didn't have much to do with church in my college years and, even after Scott and I found the church which would become our home and the place where I would be serving when I first heard a call to ministry, I still wasn't what you might call a "regular attender." Often, Scott would go on Sunday mornings without me because I didn't feel like going. This went on for a couple of years and, after that, I looked forward to teaching the younger kids in their Sunday school because it meant I got to get out of sitting in the service. Didn't expect that, did you?

Eventually, though, I began to go more frequently. I began to look forward to the sermon. I began to look forward to the people I would see at church and the songs we would sing. Granted, there were still songs I dreaded and sermons I questioned, and not in the gee-that-made-me-think kind of way. I **do** know what it's like to be in the pews! But I was becoming part of a church family, a family bigger than my own, a family where I was shown grace and love and welcome in abundance. I was part of a family of people who were looking for God, who were seeking to serve God, who were setting examples for me by their own lives. Becoming part of that church family led me to care about our church family as a whole, as Presbyterians, as Christians, as children of God. Becoming part of that church family got me started thinking about how to, as Paul puts it, do my best to present myself to God as one approved by God. A very gradual restoration and one that is still ongoing, and no longer stagnant.

What has your restoration looked like? Was it sudden? Is it still happening? For most of us, maybe even all of us, our restoration won't be complete until we see God face-to-face. But that doesn't mean we wait until then to give thanks to God. It is right to take a moment to pause and give thanks to God along the way. Your thanks may not be in a loud voice; it might be as quiet as a pledge card placed silently in a basket. Whatever it looks like, just don't forget to turn back every now and then.

Let us pray: Thank you, God. Amen.