

Sermon  
Harvest Thanksgiving  
October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa  
The Reverend Victoria Scott  
Readings: Deuteronomy 8:7-18 Psalm 65 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 Luke 17:11-19

A dance of un-distancing...

I once came across a description of what Jesus does in this week's Gospel story of the ten lepers as a *dance of un-distancing*. Jesus's earthly ministry was, in fact, all a dance of un-distancing: un-distancing between one and the other in humanity, and un-distancing between humanity and God. The way of Jesus *is* a dance of un-distancing...

What is happening in this scene we just heard with the ten lepers? It's *un-distancing*. How does that un-distancing happen? By grace, and with *thanks*.

We hear that as Jesus enters a village, ten lepers approach him and "...*Keeping their distance*, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:12-13) It's important to consider a bit of context and background here. Lepers were ostracized. They were ritually unclean, and they had to live, quite literally on the margins of society, always keeping their distance. This was certainly because the disease was contagious, but it was more than that.

"Leprosy was not seen...as a punishment for sin. It was understood instead as an inexplicable act of God, which made it even more frightening. If there was nothing you did to deserve leprosy then it followed that there was nothing you could do to avoid it, and so lepers were shunned-because their disease was contagious, certainly, but it was more than that. It was their pain, their loneliness, their unspeakable fear no one wanted to catch, and so they were kept at a distance, barred from the religious community, and declared unworthy of God. They were the unclean outsiders, not to be mistaken as having anything in common with the healthy insiders."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus tells the lepers to go and show themselves to the priests. In doing that, the priests could declare them clean, and they could take their place in society. That society was full of distancing – it was all about insiders and outsiders. All about those with honour, and those with the burden of shame. These categories are about *distance*. About keeping – maintaining – distance. All about "us and them".

Nine lepers follow the rules of that society – and Jesus's instructions, actually – and go to the Temple to see the priests. Going to see the priests doesn't free them from the 'us and them' ways of that society: it restores their place in it. They no longer have to dance around the edge of that society, an improvement, certainly, but not the same as the dance of un-distancing that is Jesus's way. One of the lepers doesn't follow the rules, though. One – a

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Preaching Life: Living Out Your Vocation", Canterbury Press, 2013.

Samaritan, a double outsider in the context of Luke's Gospel by virtue of both leprosy and his identity as Samaritan – turns back. This turning around is a dance of un-distancing.

One leper turns back, and eliminates all distance from Jesus, throwing himself at his feet. This is the difference between healed of leprosy – that's what the nine received – and being "well" – or "whole" or "saved" which is how Jesus describes this one who turned back and offered thanks.

It's important to note the broader context of this story in this chapter in Luke's Gospel. After today's scene with the ten lepers, Jesus is asked by the Pharisees about the timing of the reign of God, and after that he tells another parable. It's another story of *distancing* – not like the distancing of the lepers, though, this time it's distancing by a Pharisee who keeps his distance, thankful that he is not like the thieves, rogues, adulterers and even the tax collector he sees around him. This isn't being thankful for God's love and grace and healing like the leper: this is thanks as a "godly cover story" to mask self-righteousness. In the context of this parable, we hear Jesus say "*for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*" (Luke 18:14) . This is about the kind of thanks that God invites us to give. Both the parable of the ten lepers, and this next parable in Luke 18 tell us the kind of thanks that God invites us to give – the kind of dance to make our lives. God invites us to give thanks for opportunities to reduce the distance between ourselves and others, not to give thanks for the things that maintain barriers and obstacles.

One of the steps in the dance of un-distancing – between ourselves and others, and between ourselves and God – is thanks. There are some steps before that one, though. One is trust: trust that we are loved by God, trust that God is a God *of* love, trust that God is a God of mercy. And it's not just trusting that God's love and mercy are available for us: it's trusting that God's love and mercy and grace are available for *everyone*. Part of the dance of un-distancing is also inclusivity: radical inclusivity. The dance of un-distancing is made up of steps of mercy, trust, love, grace and inclusivity as well as thanks.

I was reminded this week of what writer Anne Lamott says about prayer. She says that our prayers can be distilled into three words: Help. Thanks. And, wow.

The prayer help is about reaching a bottom, running out of ideas, and surrendering. It's also about connection – connecting to a higher power, to what Lamott describes as "...something in the next concentric circle out whose name is not me."

Praying thanks is about relief, a welling up and out of gratitude and appreciation. Lamott says that the full prayer is "Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you..." but that for reasons of brevity she refers to it as "thanks". ☺

And wow: this is a praise prayer. A prayer of wonder. It's stopping and soaking in the "wow" of creation. The wow of our human experience.

As we follow the way of Jesus, help, thanks and wow are part of our dance of un-distancing.

We can find all three in today's Gospel passage. Ten lepers ask Jesus for help. Nine of them only took this step. One of them added "thanks" into his dance routine and made it a dance of un-distancing. I'm going to suggest that "wow" was part of it too, as he heard Jesus say "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well."

So, this Thanksgiving weekend, I invite you to think about the kinds of things God invites us to be thankful for. Think about where the steps of help, thanks and wow fit into the dance routine of your life. Think about how you can dance the dance of un-distancing that Jesus calls us to dance. May this call to un-distancing take root and grow in our hearts and minds. May we all dance steps of mercy, trust, love, grace and inclusivity as well as help, thanks and wow wherever we go from here, in Jesus name. Amen.