

GESTURES OF GRATITUDE LUKE 17:11-19

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday night we all, more than likely, spent the hour or so about 8:00 PM looking at TV and listening to the president give his first formal, prime time, press conference. The sign of how much our world has changed is how many of us decide that watching a press conference is something we needed to do. In the press conference the president had a couple of messages for us. One was the activity of the government in dealing with the changed world in which we live. He reported on the progress of the campaign to find and deal with the terrorists believed to be responsible for September 11, to deal with cells of terrorists were ever they are and whether or not they were specifically engaged in September 11, and dealing with the governments or states that provide sanctuary and support for the terrorists, whether overt like Afghanistan, or covert. The other side of the coin on this point, is the threat of further activity by terrorists on our shores, and against symbols of America in other countries. He told us that the government and all its resources were on high alert, and that the resources of all manifestations of government were called upon to be on high alert. The second major point of the conference, was that Americans need to get back to their normal lives, travel, fly, shop, see the country, all because the economic well being of the country depended upon our normal activities, which consists in large measure, of being consumers. After the press conference, Tim Russert, the host of Meet the Press, made concise note of the difficulty of what the president had to do. He had to report on the response of the government to the world that is so radically changed, and he had to encourage Americans to live in the world as though it had not changed.

1. The Text

The story we have before us is not told in any other synoptic gospel. The writer of the article in my Interpreter's Commentary on the Bible suggested that this story might be an elaboration by Luke, or by another source which Luke used, of a story that appears in the first chapter of Mark. In that story one leper approaches Jesus and declares that if Jesus will, he could heal the man of his disease. Jesus is described as being moved by pity and reached out his hand, touched the man and pronounced him clean. Then he instructs the man to go and show himself to the priest and engage in the ritual for cleansing of the disease, but tell no one what has taken place. Instead the man goes forth and tells all about what has happened.

We can see similarities. The stories involve leprosy, they involve Jesus responding to claim upon his healing powers, and they involve the citation of the ritual and procedures that have to do with the priests being the one able to confirm that the sufferer of the disease is cleansed.

In the Luke story we are reminded of Jesus being on his way to Jerusalem. If you remember, those many weeks ago, in a text from chapter 9, Jesus begins his trip to Jerusalem, to meet his destiny. In this episode, as not done in so many others, we are told where Jesus is when the episode in question takes place. He is said to be on his way to Jerusalem between Samaria and Galilee. Entering a village, Jesus is confronted with ten lepers. They stand far off and call out to him. They do so because those who are identified as having leprosy are isolated from the community and forced to have about them signs or symbols that identify them as lepers.

Some weeks ago, on a day when I was waiting to go see my doctor, I was a bit nervous and instead of working on something or reading, as I usually do, I laid on the couch in the club room of our basement and watched TV. I got captured by a movie made by HBO about a Dutch priest who served the inhabitants of a leper colony in Hawaii in the 19th century. The plight of those who suffered this disease in the ancient world was reflected in this story. In this time in Hawaii lepers were sent to a small isolated island in the Hawaiian Islands. All the resources for caring for these people were funneled through government and church authorities who never went to see them in their setting. The resources identified for the colony were routinely rerouted by the authorities for their own uses, because the lepers were out of sight, and because they all knew how useless and hopeless they were. The young priest who served them, who contracted the disease and who died in their midst, was their voice from a long way off to those who were the fount of resources that could ease their condition. Only the ones this young priest appealed to did not have ears or hearts to hear them.

The note about geography is made by Luke, in part I suspect because of the prominent roll of a Samaritan. There are ten lepers all together. And they all together call out to Jesus. We know from the parable of the Good Samaritan and other gospel texts that there was enmity between Jews and Samaritans. It is this background social condition that makes the parable of the Good Samaritan as powerful as it is. The same social background illuminates the point that Luke wants to make in this text. It is only the Samaritan who comes back to Jesus to give thanks for what has happened. Jesus even refers to the man as “foreigner”. Obviously suggesting that all the others were Jews. What is not noted but is worth noting, is that it is in the condition of leprosy and being outcast that the separation between Jews and Samaritan is overcome. As lepers the ten stand together not matter where they come from or what they believe.

There are confusions in the text. The ten appeal to Jesus, Jesus tells all the ten to go to the priest. One commentator suggests that Jesus is telling all the lepers to go to Jerusalem to show themselves to the priest there. It is the priest who can determine and affirm that cleansing has happened. On the way, their disease is healed. The one who turns back to Jesus was a Samaritan. Part of the difference between Jews and Samaritans was where God was to be worship. For Jews it is in Jerusalem at the temple. For Samaritans it is at a mountain. So it is understandable that the Samaritan would not think too much about going to the temple in Jerusalem to show himself to a priest.

11. GESTURES OF GRATITUDE

The story is about two things. It is about Jesus healing and it is about gratitude for the healing. Jesus healing involves a couple of things. It involves, as I mentioned last week, that people in need flocked to Jesus and they brought to him their misery. That is the way, is it not. When our lives are a wreck, when they are afflicted, we may come to a person, or to a group, and before too long, we are going to lay before them our lives and the ways in which they are afflicted. Jesus is reported as responding out of his empathy, his compassion and his pity for those who are so afflicted. It is this which defines us. It is this to which Jesus responds. In this case he responds by addressing those who have leprosy. What he does, however, is not just to heal them of their disease. What he does is allow them to see something taking place in the world by means of the healing of their disease. Sometimes, it has been my experience, we might be fixed on what we believe really afflicts us, and there is something which happens in our lives and to our lives that is not related directly to what we believe afflicts our lives, and we are still by what takes place, freed, healed, renewed.

To refer again to the president's press conference on Thursday night, he made the following observation. He said something to the affect, that the work of the terrorists occasioned in America the renewal of community and patriotism. It was a remarkable observation about how it is that an event which he himself, and many of us, call evil, or terrible, released in America and in ourselves something powerful, uniting and healing. There is a connection made between the event and something powerful, welcomed, to be hoped for, in us as a community and as persons.

I don't know how many times miraculous things take place in our lives. I remind myself every once in a while about some of the scenes in American Beauty; the scene a teenage boy video tapes of a piece of white paper being swirled by the wind off the ground to do a dance in front of a garage door and the boy saying, "Sometimes there is so much beauty in the world that I think my heart will burst." And then there is the scene with the father saves himself from a terrible, exploitive deed and talks quietly with a young girl, friend to his teen age daughter and asks how is daughter is doing, is she happy, and the girl tells him that yes she is, and a smiles breaks on his face as the world cracks open and he sees what lay within what is seen when it so breaks. These things happen to us. The world cracks open and light bursts forth and the external form of such a cracking of the world cannot be predicted or controlled. It comes in any number of forms, but what happens when it does occur is that we are released from what afflicts us and what holds us captive, what we have used to identify ourselves by and life stretches and deepens before us in a miraculous and awe filled and wonder filled way. And sometimes the beauty is so great that we think we will burst.

I remember experiences such as that at camps and conferences as both a teenager and an adult who lead such experiences for high school students. One of the things that we said

was that there are mountaintop experiences, but that you can't live your whole life on the mountain top. You have to go back down the mountain to ordinary life.

I guess that is in part, the experience in which we find ourselves. We have seen the world crack open and it is hard to move away from staring at it and trying to see deep into it. And at the same time we are struggling to get back to normal. We want to get back to normal, we are being urged to get back to normal

What the Samaritan does is to turn back to Jesus and he is described as... "praising God with a loud voice and he fell on his face at Jesus feet..." The Samaritan finds was to express his gratitude. He experiences what has taken place in his life, he notes the changed condition of his life, and he just doesn't go on back to normal as the ten other lepers must have done. He engages in acts of thanksgiving. He engages in gestures of gratitude.

A part of my job while working in the Admissions Office at the university was being the liason in the admissions office with the Music Department and the Dance Department. I was able to speak often and at length with people in each Department. I wondered over lunch with the chair of the Dance Department about how we could find physical gestures that gave expression to common and deep human experiences. Why do we not have gestures for wonder, gladness, praise, and in the case of this text, gestures for Gratitude.

I would think that is something we should be challenged to think about as people who worship each week and who guard the tradition regarding worship. In our stewardship of the tradition, we are always called upon not only to preserve, but to enlarge, broaden and deepen the tradition. Perhaps some day some of us somewhere, will discover that there are gestures of gratitude which can be embodied by anyone. Such gestures come from the crack in the world through which has flooded that light that alters our lives, and when they are engaged in, they remind us of what has happened to us in our lives.

Amen.