

Sermon on Luke 17:11-19 and 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
21st Sunday After Pentecost, October 9, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
by Eric Fought

“Good Enough for Me”

I was fortunate throughout my childhood, adolescence and early adulthood to know, love and be loved by two amazing women, my grandmothers. They were both women of deep religious faith, from two different traditions, one Roman Catholic and one Anglican.

My Anglican grandmother, Grandma Wardlow, immigrated to this country with my grandfather, the Rev. James Wardlow, from Belfast Northern Ireland. She was a very proper woman, attending Eucharist each Sunday dressed well and returning home to a cup of tea and an afternoon of knitting while listening to classical music.

My Catholic grandmother, Grandma Fought, was very different. She went to Mass every day, usually in whatever she was wearing that morning. Nothing fancy. She went through life with a sense of self and true humility. Her faith drove that perspective, which was always optimistic, and always filled with gratitude. Her life was very simple. She died in the same house that my father and all of his brothers and his sister were raised in, the same cast iron skillet on the stove that had been there since the back sun room was once a neighborhood grocery store.

When you asked her why she didn't buy a new fridge, or an air conditioner, or an answering machine, or even put a shower in her bathroom, Grandma's response was always, what I have is good enough for me.

It was good enough for her. She had all that she needed. And she was grateful.

I was thinking about my grandmothers recently when I heard a wonderful story about gratitude.

It was a story about a young student chaplain who was assigned to visit an elderly woman in an extended care hospital. The woman was declining fairly rapidly. The student kept going back, drawn in by what she found when she stopped in to see her—the woman's unfailing sense of joy.

She could not move her arms and legs. But she would say, “I'm just so happy I can move my neck.” When she could no longer move her neck, she would say, “I'm just so glad I can hear and see.”

When the chaplain finally asked the woman what would happen if she lost her sense of sound and sight, she said, “I'll just be so grateful that you come to visit.”

Gratitude.

That's the common thread between our first reading this morning and our gospel text. Both tell stories of healing, the healing of lepers in antiquity.

In the reading from 2 Kings we hear the story of Naaman, a mighty warrior, a military hero in fact. He was powerful, a respected Army commander. And yet, we are told, even though he was a man of such stature, he suffered from leprosy.

And here is Naaman, desperate to be healed, fully aware of how devastating such an illness was, off to see Elisha at Elisha's house. He rides up in all of his glory, with his horses and chariots, stopping at the entrance to the house. But Elisha doesn't come out. Instead, he sends a messenger.

It's kind of like the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff driving up to the White House in a motorcade expecting to meet with the President of the United States and the President sending him a text message.

The message sent was for Naaman to go wash himself in the river. Simple enough. But, the nerve! To not even come out of the house! You can almost hear Naaman say, as he rides off in anger, "doesn't he know who I am?"

But then something happens, what we might call a moment of clarity. His servants convince him to take the generous offer, to humble himself and go down to the river to wash and be clean.

It's a story about humility, God showing up in unlikely ways, and in the end, it's a story about gratitude. Because, once Naaman decides to humble himself, as soon as he allows a moment of conversion, he is healed. And it causes him to return to Elisha's house, in gratitude, singing God's praises.

We find a similar set of events in this morning's gospel. We've been following along with Jesus and his disciples for quite a while now, on a journey toward Jerusalem and all that will come. By now, you can imagine that Jesus and his companions are tired and ready to arrive at their destination. And in this account they are once again just outside of what is considered to be extremely dangerous territory for Jews of the day, near Samaria.

Ten lepers—outcasts, broken, dirty and sick, keep their distance while pleading for healing. In Luke's version of the encounter, Jesus doesn't engage with the lepers in any tangible way, simply telling them to go and show themselves to the priests. The priests were the ones who would determine whether someone was to be deemed worthy to be a part of the temple practice, and, thus, part of the life of the community.

And, as they followed their instructions, they were healed. We know that nine went on their way. One turned back. The Samaritan.

Now, I'm sure that all of you remember my sermon of a few months ago, on the parable of the Good Samaritan. But for those of you who may have forgotten some of the superb analysis and historical context I offered then, I'll share a bit once again.

Samaritans were a group of people despised for their differences and their identity by first century Jews and Samaritans viewed Jews through the same lens. Galilean Jews were heretics in the eyes of Samaritans, and vice versa. The vitriol, the hatred, was so great that Jesus' own followers, his disciples James and John, asked if they should destroy the Samaritans with fire when they refused to allow Jesus and his disciples to stay in a Samaritan town. They wanted to kill them.

And here, in this story, it is the one of the 10 that is a Samaritan who turns back and expresses gratitude. Perhaps this is because he has experienced a greater sense of being an outcast, as both a Samaritan and someone suffering from leprosy. No matter the reason, he falls at the feet of Jesus in deep gratitude.

Namaan and the Samaritan, both cured of their leprosy, find themselves praising God in a loud voice, in gratitude for not only the physical healing they have received, but also in gratitude for the many ways that they have been allowed a new life.

Because they have been healed, because of the conversion that has taken place, they are able to return fully to society, to their community.

Much has been written and said about gratitude in popular culture, self-help literature and spiritual writing. We know that our mood, our outlook on life can be adjusted if we are able to choose an attitude of gratitude. And, we can help others by sharing with them what we are grateful for.

My Grandma Fought's gratitude list likely consisted of her children and grandchildren, but also her bingo winnings and the fact that my Uncle Dave won at golf that afternoon.

However, the gratitude shown by Namaan and the one leper of the 10 in this morning's readings is much deeper than what might be written down on a gratitude list in one's journal. Yes, we should be grateful for the crisp fall air, the friends we will meet this afternoon, or the new job.

But I believe we are called to a deeper understanding, to be grateful for the *wide variety* of experiences that we encounter each day. After all, I don't know about you, but there have been days, months and even years, when I have had a great deal of difficulty writing much on a gratitude list.

And yet, sometimes the list simply needs to read, I'm still standing. Or, I made it. And I'm grateful for the experience—the pain, the loss, the feelings of brokenness, of otherness.

Because it is in that place, after we have walked through the humiliation that life offers, as Namaan did, or find ourselves restored to our community after a time of being

separated or removed, as the Samaritan who suffered from leprosy experienced, we can sing God's praises.

It is a song that is pleasing to our God, for sure. But even more pleasing to the One who Created us is the heeding of Jesus at this end of this morning's Gospel. Get up and go!

Luke uses this same language elsewhere by the way, using the phrase get up and go, to emphasize significance. The prodigal son gets up and goes back to his father, after the annunciation, Mary gets up and goes to see Elizabeth. In Acts, Luke writes about Paul getting up and going to Damascus.

Here, the command to get up and go comes with a promise to the Samaritan. Get up and go, your faith has made you well. Your faith has saved you.

Indeed, the good news of this encounter carries with it the promise that through Jesus, God empowers people to step across boundaries, share mercy with outsiders, pay attention to things worthy of praise and move forward into God's future with assurance that there is more to God's story than meets the eye.

And, as Grandma Fought would say, that is good enough for me.