

Sunday, October 9, 2016
Psalm 66; Luke 17:11-19

Lois Harder

Help me. Help me. Help me. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

One year ago our friends and neighbors Kate and Raymond Clause had a very serious car accident. They were traveling, coming from Chattanooga on I-40, outside of Little Rock, around midnight. Ray had set the cruise control and was listening to an audio book, Kate had put her seat back to snooze; they both had their seat belts on. Suddenly they were slammed from behind with a force that sent their little pick-up truck rolling end over end, several times. Ray remembers that it took a long time for their truck to come to a stop. When it finally landed, they were on the other side of the highway, headed the opposite direction, but right side up, at least. Ray remembers that the “check engine” light came on... the irony was not lost on him! He looked over at Kate and could not tell whether she was dead or alive. He got out of the truck and went around to her door. When he tried the handle the door fell open. He took her seat belt off and she moved. She was alive but unconscious. A trucker had seen their plight, pulled over and had already called for help. The ambulance was there within minutes. Both Ray and Kate were in the ICU at the Little Rock hospital for a couple days. Neither of them had any broken bones. Kate had a deep laceration on her ankle and had sustained many internal injuries; since she'd been reclining, she was thrown around like a rag doll inside the truck. Ray's lungs had been squeezed, in his words, “like a kitchen sponge” by the seat belt and he was coughing up blood and not breathing well. In the hospital, Ray lay perfectly still for 3 days, partly because it hurt so much to move, partly because they told him that if he didn't rest they may have to put him on a ventilator. He did not want that. Across the hall he could hear Kate's cries as she dealt with her severe pain. She was held in the ICU a day longer than he. Last weekend they hosted a party. It was a party to celebrate the fact that they're here! They're alive and thriving! They still have aches and pains – Kate's ankle will probably give her trouble for many years to come. But they're here. And they're grateful. One of their friends brought a cake to their party that said “We're so glad you're not dead!”

Last Sunday the lectionary writers turned our attention to the importance and legitimacy of lamenting. Tom preached a powerful sermon from the book of Lamentations; it's significant enough to have an entire book about it in our Bible! There was an engaged and thoughtful discussion about laments and lamenting in the Faith and Issues class. The topic struck a chord, hit a nerve. Clearly, we need permission and space in our lives to lament. And clearly, there's no lack of reasons to lament!

Today the lectionary texts are drawing us to another important Biblical concept – the notion of gratefulness. I love that these texts, about lamenting and being grateful, are presented back-to-back, one following on the heels of the other. The only thing that could have been done differently to maybe make it even better would have been to have included them on the same day! But that would have diluted one or the other – this way both concepts – that might seem completely opposite of one another – can be given their full due.

Do you think these ten lepers lamented? Do you hear their cry, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” as a lament? I think I could pretty easily hear it that way.

“On the way to Jerusalem, near Samaria, Jesus and his disciples encountered ten men with leprosy. It is difficult to exaggerate the social alienation and isolation of these ten men. People lived in dread of leprosy, a loosely defined term used to describe any skin blemish or eruption that looked suspicious... People with leprosy lived in total isolation: banished from their homes, from the loving touch of spouses, children, parents, from the faith community – so feared (were they) that even to cross the shadow of one with leprosy was (thought) to risk infection. They lived alone, away from the community. Sometimes they banded together to become a small company of misery.”

Now, “being grateful (was) not a precondition for being healed by Jesus; all the lepers found themselves cleaned as they (were on their way) to the priests.” We don’t get any indication of whether ANY of them were particularly grateful prior to their cleansing – and actually, we don’t get any indication that they asked to be healed. They asked for mercy. In the instructions Jesus gave, they were supposed to go and show themselves to the priest. The priest was the one who had the power to reinstate them back to their places in the community. He was the one who needed to “certify” that the blemishes were gone, that they had been ritually cleansed and were ready to return to their families, their jobs, their dignity and honor. But being grateful was not part of the deal.

Yet, it was the one who turned around, the hated Samaritan, who came back to say ‘thank you’, and to whom Jesus said, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” As Esther Schmidt observed in our Wednesday evening Bible study, “It seems like more was healed than just his leprosy.” What does that mean? Your faith has made you well... “Was there something about this man that was more well, healthier than the other nine? Apparently. Does his gratitude have something to do with his faith? Apparently.

Jesus was not interested in this man’s religion. He didn’t ask him about his theology or moral values – whether his was pro-choice or pro-life, how he voted or spent his Sabbath. All we really know about him was that he recognized a gift when he saw it and experienced it, that he returned to say ‘thank you’ and that Jesus said to him, ‘Your faith has made you well.’ That is surely to say that by Jesus’ definition, faith and gratitude are very closely related, that faith without gratitude is not faith at all, and that there is something life-giving about gratitude.

This man’s wellness is more than being rid of his leprosy. Biblical scholars point out the way the Bible uses the concepts of wellness, wholeness and salvation almost interchangeably. ‘Your faith has made you well/made you whole/saved you.’ Being grateful and saying thank you are absolutely at the heart of God’s hope for the human race.

There is evidence that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. ‘Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude’ was the title of a Web launch by a medical group. The essay cited thousands of years of philosophic and religious teaching urging gratitude and then cited new evidence that grateful people, people for whom gratitude is a permanent trait, have a health edge. It may be that grateful people take better care of themselves, but there is evidence that gratitude alone is a stress reducer, that grateful people are more hopeful, and that there are links between gratitude and the immune system. So your mother was right when she made you call your grandmother and thank her for the birthday card.

The basic Christian response to God is gratitude: gratitude for the gift of life, gratitude for the world, gratitude for the dear people God has given us to enrich and grace our lives. The basic Christian experience is gratitude to God for God's love in Jesus Christ and the accompanying gift of hopeful confidence and wholeness and wellness that comes with it, regardless of the worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Kate and Ray – I love the way you've chosen to celebrate the fact that you're alive! And Ray says it will be an annual party. Coming face-to-face with your own mortality seems to have brought forth a response of gratitude in you – wanting to share your joy with your friends and loved ones. Good for you! “Writer Anne Lamott says her two favorite prayers are, in the morning, ‘Help me. Help me. Help me,’ and at bedtime, ‘Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.’ In our complex, war-torn, weeping world, in the midst of our laments and our intercessory prayers, perhaps these simple words, morning and evening, are, really all we need to remember. Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4, pages 164-169, John Buchanan

<http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/proper23c.html>