

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
“Grace Is Always Amazing Grace”
Luke 17:11-19

Our story opens with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, which is another way of saying he is on his way to the cross. And he is passing through an undefined area between Samaria and Galilee, and since there is no such area, we wonder what the gospel writer is trying to convey? Is Jesus in a kind of no man's land or a sort of in-between area where social, religious, and physical impurities are manifested? Whatever Luke means by this “in-between” space we are given the feeling that cultural norms are in some way suspended here, and we can expect something new to happen. We might say Jesus has entered a biblical “Twilight Zone.”

If you recall the TV series “The Twilight Zone” the opening scenes often are of a main character coming upon or entering a town or city, some place which becomes the setting for the story. In our story today Jesus comes upon a village, where he is met by ten lepers. They keep their distance because of their illness, and they call out to Jesus, and at this point the second unusual thing happens. They identify Jesus as “Master,” which is a term, up until this point, only the disciples use. Again, we have to wonder what the gospel writer is trying to say? For some reason these marginalized people have a greater sense than most of who Jesus is. They seem to see more deeply than most people Jesus encounters in his ministry.

The unusual occurrences continue with Jesus not healing the lepers outright, but simply telling them to go show themselves to the priests. The point of this was so the priests could validate their cleansing and make the appropriate offering as Moses had instructed, but they weren't healed yet! The healing happens as they obey Jesus and begin the journey to present themselves to the priests. They are healed on the way! At this point we enter into the focal point of the story, because one of the lepers sees far more than the other nine. He returns to Jesus knowing he has been a recipient of God's grace. He returns in gratitude and worship, praising God with a loud voice, and falling prostrate at Jesus' feet bubbling over with thanksgiving.

It so happens the leper was a Samaritan, which is interesting, because he comes with a double curse. Not only has he contracted this awful disease which renders him socially untouchable, but he is also a despised foreigner. Hated by the Jews. Yet this is the one who more fully recognizes he has been blessed beyond measure. A gift has been given to him not having anything to do with merit or special chosen status, but has simply been given because it is God's nature to do so. Grace is always amazing grace! Grace is not something earned, it's something that happens when we open ourselves to it. When we trust God we become potential recipients of grace, as this Samaritan leper has in the story.

The conclusion to this biblical “Twilight Zone” episode is yet one final curiosity. Jesus asks the cleansed Samaritan leper where the other nine lepers were, and you get the sense he's a bit hurt. We spend so much time characterizing Jesus in his divine status, that we often miss out on his human capacities. In this case, Jesus feels hurt because more gratitude isn't shown for a miraculous healing. The point of Jesus coming was to connect with us as a human being. Though we see the face of God in Jesus, he is still a man who experienced the full range of feelings. The hurts and disappointments of existence did not escape him.

It has become my practice to go over commentaries of the text before I write a sermon, and one which helped me to write this sermon was written by David Lose, he writes: *At the outset of this story, ten men are stuck. They live “between regions” in a “no-man’s” land of being socially, religiously, and physically unclean. By the end of the story, all ten are made well. But one has something more. He has seen Jesus, recognized his blessing and rejoiced in it, and changed his course of action and behavior. And because he “sees” what has happened, the leper is not just healed, but is made whole, restored, drawn back into relationship with God and humanity. In all these ways he has been, if we must choose a single word, “saved.” What is true stewardship, worship, and Christian living? It is the tenth leper turning back. For now as then, seeing makes all the difference.*

That's a wonderful summation of our story today, with the added insight that seeing makes all the difference. It makes all the difference in the way we interpret events, and the way we approach life's problems, and in the way we feel from moment to moment. Take for example the way we see God. Is God a stern judge or a loving parent? How about the way we see ourselves. Do you see yourself as a failure or as a beloved child? And how about the future. Do you feel uncertain about it or is it an open horizon? The way we see things is crucial in how we act, feel and respond to life's events and challenges, as well as life in general. I was curious to see how many times the word “see” is used in Luke's Gospel, and my concordance lists 37 “sees,” in the Gospel of Luke alone!

The Samaritan leper sees that God's grace has healed him, and beyond that he sees Jesus is God's instrument of healing, that grace was bestowed upon him through Jesus. He sees more completely than the others, and because he has a fuller vision his response is of a greater magnitude. Compounded to this is the fact he is not only a leper, but also a despised Samaritan. His healing exceeds the others in that not only is he cured of his disease, but he is also accepted for who he is. In Jesus' eyes he's not a despised Samaritan, but simply another child of God. The Samaritan sees what Jesus sees and in doing so is made whole, which is another word for salvation. The Samaritan's healing goes beyond the restoration of his body. It encompasses his entire being...mind, body and spirit, bringing him into right relationship with self, others, and God.

This is the healing we all seek. Whether we know it or not. Marcus Borg goes into more detail about the importance of “seeing.” *Thus as a wisdom teacher Jesus used aphorisms and parables to invite his hearers to “see” in a radically new way. The appeal is to the imagination, to that place within us in which reside our images of reality and our images of life itself; the invitation is to a different way of seeing, to different images of shaping our way of life. This emphasis upon “seeing” runs throughout his message. There are those who have eyes and yet do not see. There is a blindness that afflicts the sighted. And how one sees makes all the difference, “for the eye is the lamp of the body.” How we see determines the path that we walk, the way that we live. (“Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time,” p.74)*

Something terrible happened in our city last Wednesday. A sheriff's deputy was shot and killed when he encounter a burglar at a residence not far from our house. His name was Steve Owen, a Sargent and 29 year veteran who had recently won the Sheriff's Departments highest honor for courage. Mayor Parris was quoted as saying, “I just left 100 officers crying. It's indescribable seeing that many sheriff's deputies in tears.”

How do we see such a thing? Certainly a tragedy, and a painful, sad experience for a great many people, since Sargent Owen appeared to have been in relationship not only with family and friends, but also with many of his fellow deputies. But beyond the immediate tragedy what do we make of it? Is it yet another incidence of the unraveling of our society? Is it an indication of rampant lawlessness, and too many guns in the hands of the wrong people? Does it mean no where is really safe anymore? Is it the end of the world? All of the above may be true, but seeing things in such a manner only leads to anxiety about life, and where we live, and creates a kind of infectious fear.

Another way of seeing this tragedy is to see it as yet another opportunity to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. What has happened only serves to show us that this world desperately needs to hear and see Christ's message of love and peace. Such a message is not conveyed through violence and fear, but through the very actions, words and vision of God's people. These tragic events, of which there will surely be more, should only make us more determined to stand up and speak out with Christ's message of love. The predicament we find ourselves in today is not really about guns and lawlessness, as much as it is about too many people who are living in the dark. Too many people who have no vision, who can't see God and his grace. Grace that is always amazing, and is always around us all the time. You just have to wake up and see it! Richard Rohr says it like this:

All, absolutely everything, is now made use of in this great economy of grace. "Grace is everywhere," Georges Bernanos (Bear-ron-no's) said both at the end of his great novel (The Dairy of a Country Priest?) and at the very end of his life. Likewise nearing her death, Therese of Lisieux (Tear-reese Lees-lu) said, "Everything is grace!" Rohr continues: ...you will discover that the meaning of the universe, at it's deepest and final level, is only "mercy within mercy within mercy."

Well, this certainly isn't what were experiencing with this latest tragedy, or with the killing of five policeman in Dallas, or with the fact that there have been 97 Line of Duty deaths of police officers so far this year. Of those 97 deaths 42 are attributed to gunfire. What does this have to do with God's grace? It has nothing to do directly with God's grace, but has everything to do with an absence of grace, and everything to do with people refusing to open there eyes to what is right in front of them. What is it going to take? What does it look like when an entire society reaches the end of it's rope? Because that's probably what's going to need to happen before people can see the truth. As Eugene Peterson interprets the third Beatitude: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule." (Matthew 5:3)

It's tragic and sad that this is what it must come to for people to wake up, but isn't it true in your own life experience? Don't we typically wait until our vision is blurred, and our options are exhausted before we sincerely turn to God for help? The False-Self wants to go it alone. It doesn't want to rely on anyone or anything else but it's own resources. That's what it means to be in control, and control is the name of the game. The problem is "control" is an illusion, because we can't be anymore in control than a fish can be in control of the ocean, or a bird of the air. The best we can do is realize were a part of what is, and to participate in God's game. Thomas Merton describes it like this:

The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomenon of life, the more we analyze it out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.

To the extent we are trying to maintain control of our lives is the extent we are living in unreality or non-reality. The solution to life is in opening our eyes to the truth, and letting go of the reins so God can guide us over the humps and through the loops. This takes practice, and a lifetime to learn, but it is possible. People do wake up, and of course they do! Why else would God give us the Gospel?

I can't think of any better depiction of God's grace than Peterson's interpretation of the Lilies of the Field parable in Matthew. Listen to it in its entirety:

Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or – worse – stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moths and rust and burglars. It's obvious isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being. Your eyes are windows into your body. If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light. If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a dank cellar. If you pull the blinds on your windows, what a dark life you will have!

You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and money both. If you decide for God, living a life of God worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than the birds.

Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion – do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby along side them. If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers – most of which are never even seen – don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?

*What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, **to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving.** People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes. (Matthew 6:19-34, The Message)*

The crucial line in the parable in terms of grace is, “to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving.” That's what grace is all about, because grace is already there for the taking. We live in it. Let go and see what happens. Would God lie to us?

Rev. Mitch Becker
October 9, 2016

