

Luke 17:11-19
Creekside COB
October 10, 2004

“The Jazz Factor”

"You are really clumsy tonight," Pam said to her husband Dennis. It was the second time he dropped his fork during dinner. They both laughed, but Denny's laughter masked his concern. He had been dropping things daily. His usually precise handwriting was becoming difficult to read. At work he was having a hard time gripping tools. He kept telling himself it was nothing, and that it would probably go away on its own, but he went to see a neurologist, just to be sure.

A battery of tests revealed that Dennis had ALS... Lou Gehrig's Disease. It wasn't long until he started falling. His hands began to turn inward. His speech slurred. January I drove to Ohio to visit Dennis. By then he was in a wheel chair.

Dennis and I were friends since high school and worked together in a glass shop during my summers home from college. We discussed theology and philosophy while cutting plate glass and mirrors. But after his diagnosis our abstract discussions became personal. The question shifted from, "If a loving God exists, why is there so much suffering?" to, "Why am I suffering and why is God allowing it to happen to me?"

Near the end of our daylong visit, Dennis asked a question and made a prediction. He asked to conduct his funeral. I had never done a funeral for a friend or a peer. I swallowed hard and said, "You don't know what you're asking...of course I will." Then he said, "Its not death I fear. I'm afraid people will stop coming to see me as my condition worsens." Unfortunately, his fear was well founded. As his condition deteriorated, visits were less frequent, then stopped altogether. Nine months later, Dennis died. He was only thirty-six.

The reasons given for not coming were predictable. "I couldn't bear to see him in that condition." "I want to remember him like he was." "I don't think I could handle it. I might get emotional and have to leave. That would upset him more than if I hadn't come at all." I've spent lots of time with sick and dying people. It IS hard, but not for the reasons we give. The main reason is unspoken. The sick threaten the well being of the well. We don't like being near sickness and death because it reminds us of our mortality and the fact that we cling to health and life itself by a thin thread.

Denny's funeral was a reunion of the Class of 1971. The church was full of thirty-five and thirty-six year olds grieving his death, while trying to hang on to the illusion that it won't happen to me.

In preparation for anointing we sometimes sing, "Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life." Creating life from death is the domain of God, and faith in Christ can raise us from deaths we face in this life. Faith is what keeps us going and keeps us living.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is at the border of Samaria and Galilee. It was "no-man's-land" where no Jew would ever go. The Samaritans were remnant Jews who had been isolated from the main Jewish population after a war. They intermingled with other cultures and intermarried and incorporated foreign religions into Judaism. To "true Jews," the Samaritans were hated half-breeds.

We build hospitals, nursing homes, and institutions to shield us from the sick, suffering, and death. Back then, these people we labeled, "unclean." This was especially so for people who suffered from leprosy. They were totally cut off from their families and communities, and they couldn't worship in the temple. Leprosy was a sign of God's judgment upon sinners. The only human touch they received was from fellow lepers. It was a cruel kind of quarantine. Their faces and bodies had to be covered and they could only come within shouting distance of "clean" people.

Near the border Jesus ran into ten lepers-nine Jews and a Samaritan. Suffering was a stronger bond than their religious hatred. It didn't matter since they all were good as dead. Here, they meet Jesus who was headed for Jerusalem, which meant he was as good as dead also.

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" they shouted. Jesus' response was odd. He didn't apply spit and mud to their deformed faces and limbs. He didn't forgive their sins. He didn't pronounce them healed. He didn't cast out any demons. He offered no comforting pastoral words. He didn't go near them. He just said, "Go show yourselves to the priests."

Not everyone could worship in the Temple. In Leviticus 21:16 God said to Moses, "None of your descendants who has a blemish can approach the altar." No one with a defect, deformity, or handicap was permitted in the Temple. They hadn't heard about the Americans With Disabilities Act. Before lepers could return to society, they had to be examined by a priest and pronounced clean.

"Go-- show yourselves to the priests," Jesus said. And on the way, something happened. One leper looked at his hand and shouted, "Look at this, will you! I've got fingers!" He looked at another man and said, "Jacob! You have a nose!" Their putrid flesh was replaced by an Oil of Olay luster. With limbs restored, they could get to the priests all the faster. "Come on, boys. Time is wasting!"

But the Samaritan, the one with a double strike against him, didn't follow Jesus' instructions. Instead, he returned to thank him. We're not talking about a petite, polite, thank you recitation. He fell at Jesus' feet, crying in the dirt and blubbering so hard that Jesus could hardly understand a word he was saying.

"Ten of you were healed," Jesus said. "Where are the others?" What kind of question was that? They were doing what Jesus told them to do. "Go show yourselves to the priests," he said. They took him literally and did just that.

This story isn't just a little moralism about being grateful to God. Maybe the nine didn't bother coming back because they were insensitive, jerks whose parents never taught them to say, "Thank you." Maybe they didn't care about God and went fishing every Sunday instead of going to church. They were healed. But the Samaritan received something more. "Get up and be on your way," Jesus told him. "Your faith has healed AND saved you."

I hate being sick. I hate being sick because life goes on without me. Two weeks ago I had vertigo. I couldn't stand up let alone get to church, but you went ahead and had church without me! I wanted to play in the church golf outing that afternoon. Did anyone suggest cancelling it? No-o-o. You had it anyway. You had a great time without me! Do you know why I hate being sick? It tells me that I am limited and vulnerable and breakable and destined to die.

When you're sick, you want to FEEL BETTER AND GET BACK TO NORMAL. The lepers raced to see a priest and get a clean bill of health so they could become NORMAL again!

Normal meant they were no longer outcasts. It meant being like everyone else. Normal meant getting a job, working eight to five, two weeks paid vacation, getting married, having a few kids, driving a mini-van, owning a home entertainment center to sit around with the wife and kids watching DVD's while eating Healthy Choice frozen dinners and microwave popcorn. The nine lepers weren't looking for all that much -just a better complexion, a chance to fit in, and be ordinary, average people.

The Samaritan understood what his healing meant. He had not just been physically healed-he was brought back from the dead. He was resurrected. When your life is given back by the grace of God, living like before isn't satisfactory. People who suffer heart attacks and undergo open-heart surgery speak of having a "new lease on life." Cancer patients who are given little hope of survival go into remission and live life with urgency and purpose. People who have close calls and undeniable answers to fervent prayer, know there is no "going back to normal."

Ten were healed, but one was saved. Only the Samaritan understood that extravagant love given calls for extravagant gratitude returned. While the others talked about how great it was to wear shorts and tank tops, the Samaritan was experiencing what new life was all about.

Paul Duke said that when this man broke into gratuitous praise, he was expressing "the jazz factor." Jazz is driven by improvisation. The musician isn't limited to playing the notes on the page. He doesn't just follow the instructions. He experiments with different notes and time signatures. He doesn't just "think" his way through it, but lets his heart lead. The jazz factor is praise, and Paul Duke says, "Praise is love improvising its answer to love."

Wednesday evening the board met with Bill Walter from Church Growth Services, the firm from South Bend that will manage our next capital campaign. Angi Marcin wasn't able to be with us for the initial interview, so she asked Bill this question: "What did you feel from us after the first meeting? Did you feel positive energy? Did you sense any excitement and enthusiasm from us?" He first said the church has done an exceptional job of getting ready for a campaign and building program." The word he used to describe the spirit of the board was "determined." "You won't accomplish anything without determination," he said. In a follow up note Bill wrote, "The most exciting task imaginable is expanding God's work through the ministry of the local church."

We have determination. What about excitement? Not the contrived, "Rah! Rah!" cheerleader variety. I'm talking about excitement that comes from knowing that God's grace has healed and saved us-God's grace that makes us acceptable despite the things we do to mar and blemish the image in which we were created.

Barbara Taylor says the question isn't, "Where are the nine?" It is, "Where is the one who followed his heart instead of the instructions? Doesn't the church resemble a dutiful procession of cleansed lepers who are doing the right thing at the temple?"

The love of Jesus that heals and saves is not given to help us settle into normal lives. The love and life and future God gives us calls for more than trying to, "live right" and showing up at church on Sunday.

Let's add some jazz to our repertoire. Let's show our gratitude to Christ through improvisational praise.