

October 9, 2022
Pentecost 18, Proper 23 C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

Psalm 66: 1-11

2 Timothy 2: 8-15

Luke 17: 11-19

Throughout history, and especially the history of Christianity, we have been unfortunately given to fighting over words. Words matter, of course, but when they obscure our humanity, the glory of God that is in each of us, and how we relate to one another, then our focus on words has failed. There is one line that jumped out at me in the lesson from Paul's second letter to Timothy this morning: "Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening." In spite of the importance of education and the true value of seminary, I think this verse probably ought to be read before each class in seminary!

Generations of Christians have fought over what is 'orthodox' and in so doing became overly obsessed with words. Truly, good order and

agreed upon words have their importance in our religious life and in our body politic. The Book of Common Prayer in our own tradition bears witness to that---the whole idea of 'common prayer' is that we hold these words in common because they express our common faith. But oh, the danger of wrangling over words and losing Christ altogether!

And this was Paul's message to young Timothy in this portion of the letter. As he began this section: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David,--that is my gospel....." Paul encourages Timothy to remember Jesus, and the core teaching that came from his life, teachings, death, resurrection and ascension. When all the theological words fail us, that is what we fall back on. He lived and taught us what it really meant to be alive. When he said "You are the light of the world", what do you think he meant? The icon behind us uses the words from the gospel of John (8), "I am the light of the world" -- which, to my thinking, means that through him all of life is illuminated and we can see. But then Jesus himself turns this back on us and calls us light (Matt 5). What are we to make of that? How can I be light to the world?.....I think he wanted us to really contemplate that and find it to be true. Have you?

Sometimes when we are trying to be the light, we have to be shaken up a bit.....even shaken out of our orthodoxy. This was true in the portion of Jeremiah we read this morning. This portion of Jeremiah recounts a letter that was written to the people of Jerusalem carried off in exile in 597 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar first squashed a rebellion. The king, a bunch of nobles and notables, and many people were carried off to Babylon for safe keeping and held as something of a perpetual ransom in hopes that the remainder left would be more compliant. It worked for about 10 years until there was another rebellion and Nebuchadnezzar overthrew and destroyed Jerusalem and kingdom of Judah for the last time in 587---when most everyone else was carried off into exile.

Jeremiah's letter does something interesting though. He encourages the people to set down roots and multiply and get along with their captors--for their captivity was somehow God's will. This was not the orthodox position; and in fact there were other 'prophets' of Judah who were saying the exact opposite – the orthodox position. That position was that their defeat was an anomaly and they would soon be going back to Jerusalem, reestablishing the kingdom of Judah – for this is what God had always

promised them. But Jeremiah was to be the true prophet, and it took another 70 years until the people were allowed to return and reestablish their kingdom. Sometimes we need to see the hand of God in different ways. Jeremiah saw this.

The gospel is an interesting echo of this in the story of the lepers. Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, encounters a group of 10 lepers. If you know your history, lepers were a group of diseased people that were outcasts and very much feared. There was the fear of contagion. A corollary in our own time would be the early 80's when so little was known about AIDS, how it was transmitted, and everyone was afraid. Certainly as a gay man I knew that fear. And I suppose we've lived through something of the same thing with COVID recently – especially as it became known that there was asymptomatic spread.

In the time of Jesus lepers were required to live away from others and in their own community. They often lived near towns or villages in hopes of begging for food; but every time they came near people they were required to shout “unclean, unclean” to warn the others. Leprosy still exists in the world, though greatly diminished. Many of us will remember

the story of Fr. Damien who worked in the leper colony of Hawaii, and has become a patron saint of outcasts. When I lived in Hawaii there was still a part of the state income tax return that asked a question about Hansen's Disease – the other name for Leprosy.

There are several things that are interesting about this story. Did you notice that though Jews and Samaritans did not associate, those distinctions fell away in a leper community. In this story Jewish lepers and at least one Samaritan leper lived together. Its always interesting how being an outcast can make strange bedfellows. When Jesus said to go and show themselves to a priest, he was following Jewish law regarding how a leper was to prove that he or she was healed. It was in their going as Jesus ordered them, in their obedience, that they were healed.

And it must be noted that it was only the Samaritan who came back to give thanks after he was healed. What was the gospel writer trying to say in this little story? The others were obedient and doing what they were told – they were 'orthodox', if you will; but something was missing. Where was the joy, the thanksgiving? When he returned Jesus told him to go on

his way, that his faith had made him 'well'. A better translation is "your faith has made you whole". Ponder that.

This is, of course, the time of year that we stop to ponder the grace of God and return to give thanks for the harvest – representative of God's abundance. And here we hear in Jesus' teaching the importance of not only following (obedience) but of stopping to give thanks. There is something wonderful when we unlock the power of praise and thanksgiving in our lives – and I think not only to God, but to one another too. We do this most powerfully and sacramentally every week in the Eucharist, which comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving. In English we call it the 'Great Thanksgiving'.

In closing, I'd like to share one of my favorite prayers from the Prayer Book, the General Thanksgiving from Morning Prayer....

BCP, P. 101

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made.

We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.