

What Would It Take to Live in Grace?
Luke 17: 11-19
Second Sunday in Lent
Worship in Action Sunday*
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

My mother taught me to say thank you. Whenever we received something from someone, we were required to respond with gratitude, either verbally or in writing, whether we were actually grateful or not. To this day it bothers her when others don't do the same. She has been known to give a gift only to resent it later because the recipient failed to acknowledge the gift. "It's the least they could do," she might say, "especially after how generous I was." I have heard others say that they are tempted to write or call to ask if the person received the gift just to elicit that "thank you" that never came.

We could look at this story of the ten healed lepers and wonder where their mothers went wrong, since only one of them returns to express appreciation for Jesus' efforts, and that one a Samaritan—an outsider. But in these few moments I want you to consider not what we think Jesus deserved but rather what Jesus offered: grace.

What is grace? "Unmerited favor." By virtue of its definition there is nothing you can do to win, earn or deserve it. It's a gift, given to one who didn't do a single thing to warrant it but who receives it anyway. It flies smack in the face of our assumptions that we need to merit a gift before we get one.

But not grace. Jesus sees these lepers...what he "sees" isn't clear but notice that he doesn't touch, admonish, even speak words of healing. They do exactly what lepers were required to do: they kept their distance; they spoke to him but did not advance to get closer to him. They asked for mercy, not healing. And Jesus does nothing more than tell them to show themselves to the priests, the very first step in the process for a leper to be declared "clean."

“Clean” is a socially defined status that can only be given by properly observed social and religious ritual. “Clean” is not something one can achieve by one's own means. That is why Jesus sends the ten to show themselves to the priests. The priests will supervise the authorized rituals for determining if indeed the lepers are now free of their disease, and, if so, declare them to be clean; declare them to be able to re-join their families and communities.”

And so, they go on their way, presumably to begin the process of healing. But only one returns to thank Jesus, the one, admittedly, whom the priests had no jurisdiction over, because this one was Samaritan. This one had no need to see the priest. And this one gets all the attention because they praise God. Because they acknowledge what has been done from them. Which is great; Jesus affirms this choice. But it's not grace.

Grace is what is given to the ones who *don't* return, who hear what Jesus says and run, beginning the process of healing by the means he offered it to them. Grace, unmerited favor, is God's gift that *doesn't* require we return gratitude or even notice what is being given. We are its recipients every time we *assume* that we are forgiven, that we are worthy, that we are welcome.

Grace is personified in the homecoming of the Prodigal, in the renewal of the Covenant, in the blessing of each day we rise and live our lives again. It's the thing we most need ourselves and find the most difficult to give to others, because we live in a society that keeps score, that remembers the past, that expects us to live up to some standard none of us alone can achieve.

What would it take to live in grace—both to receive it and to offer it? It would take knowing ourselves and knowing God—by that I mean acknowledging the limits of our humanity while celebrating the gift of God's love and mercy. It would take extending to others the same “divine forgetfulness” that God extends to us, offering us over and over the chance to make ourselves whole. It would take putting away the score cards, the tally marks, and assumptions about and

history we have with one another, and beginning fresh every day, in every encounter. It would take mirroring the actions and spirit of the One who does not ask us to justify ourselves or any other, but rather to live love and mercy into the world.

What would it take for FBC to live in grace---with our Community Partners, with each other, with our larger community and the world? You have the opportunity right now to consider this as we move into action groups....

My mother taught me to be grateful, and I taught my own children that. You can never go wrong with thanksgiving. But even more powerful than gratitude is grace because it requires nothing of us but offers everything to us, including the chance to be made whole.

***Worship in Action Sunday is currently happening once a month at FBC. We move our worship to a more informal setting and combine it with engagement in ministry action groups who, inspired by the worship service they are a part of, meet to discern God's direction for their group and then return to worship prepared to live their ministry and worship in the world. Join us!**