

“Following to Jerusalem: Seeing through the Eyes of Stranger”

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

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Let's talk about tithing this morning...one of the church's favorite topics! Yeah right! One old minister used to say that he loved to preach about the tithing because it made the generous smile and the stingy cringe. Well, today we going to talk about tithing and it is not even stewardship season (actually there is no season for stewardship—being good stewards of time, talent, and resources is continual). But today we going to talk about tithing and I am not going say anything about money, or resources, or assets!

A tithe is ten percent...one out of ten...a theme in our Scripture reading today, a text from that long section in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. Indeed, our texts for Lent this year are all drawn from Luke as we draw near to Good Friday and Easter...as we draw near to Jerusalem. So listen in this text for the tithe, the ten percent.

Luke 17:11-19: ¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Leprosy was a dreaded disease in ancient Palestine. Leprosy, as many know, was a skin and body disease. Lepers in Jesus' day were required by law to live outside normal society. They lived off what people would leave them or what they could make on land not claimed by anyone else. They were required to identify themselves by yelling out, “Unclean, unclean,” should they get to close to someone without the disease...a horrible existence. Is it no wonder that they turned to Jesus who would welcome them, touch them, and offer the possibility of healthy life?

So we have ten lepers...a community shared by those living with this wretched existence and who were shunned by the rest of society. In some way, HIV/AIDS is a contemporary parallel—there is a general public fear of those with HIV/AIDS. I have a friend, an Episcopalian priest, who has no problem with celebrating communion with a common cup within a community of those who are HIV positive. He knows that he cannot get AIDS from drinking after those who are infected. How many of us would know that and would drink from the same cup that known persons with HIV/AIDS have already drunk?

Ten lepers approached Jesus, begging for mercy; and he does not shun them. He tells to go and present themselves before a priest to show that they were healed (sort of health inspector role, a role established in Old Testament regulations). All ten obey Jesus and on the way they are all

healed. But then, one of the ten does not do what Jesus said to do. Nine obey Jesus...and go to the priest. One does not do as Jesus said to do. He turns around and comes back to Jesus. And there's the tithe: the ten-percent-return to say "thank you."

One of the significant things about this healed leper, we are told, is that he was a Samaritan, a foreigner, a stranger. The implication is that the other nine were Jewish. As many of you have heard over and over again, the division between Jews and Samaritans was deep and bitter in Jesus' day. However, it seems that when you are leper, those divisions drop away. Jewish lepers and Samaritan lepers formed a community. Isn't it interesting how the health crisis set aside long-standing differences?

In any case, the Samaritan is the "tither," the one in ten who comes back to say thank you. It is not that the other nine were doing anything bad. A healed leper was supposed to go see a priest. And that's exactly what Jesus told them to do. But the stranger saw things differently and came back to Jesus.

Now if we could easily turn this story into a sort of morality tale: look how ungrateful most people are! Only one out of ten knows how to say "thank you." Nine out of ten have forgotten what their mothers taught them. We have a sort of Southern code for teaching children to say "thank you." We say to a child that has received a gift, "You know what to say, don't you?"

That's the easy sermon in this text: you ought to say "thank you." It is true...but it misses the point. The nine were doing exactly what the Old Testament law code demanded: a cured leper was to be checked by the priest. And they were doing exactly what Jesus told them to do.

Here's the surprising turn or grace-filled twist in this passage: One of the ten saw things differently...and that one receives double blessing from Jesus. All ten had received the blessing of health. But when the Samaritan returns to Jesus, Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well," Jesus is talking about a different kind of wellness...all ten were healed...but here is a wellness that comes from seeing things through a stranger's eyes. Jesus is talking about a double blessing. The gift of health...and the gift of a foreigner's eyes...a stranger's eyes.

Yes, there's a blessing in doing things the way we should...that's what the nine experienced. They would be going to the priest...getting their lives back...life would be good. But there is double blessing...which only one experiences. The double blessing comes through a stranger's eyes.

Consider the church. Why is it that so often it is the stranger who sings heartedly the hymns that we have left for others to sing...or have left to the choir? Why is it that often it is the stranger who gives thanks for blessings we have taken for granted? Blessings like this beautiful sanctuary, the dedicated coaches in church basketball, the Winthrop students among us, the Bible study opportunities, the music possibilities, the service options. Why is it that a stranger listens to the sermon that we think we have already heard? The stranger who gets excited about this old Bible or jumps at the chance serve in those places where we say, "Been there...done that...not

my turn anymore...let me just write a small check.”¹

The gift of the eyes of a stranger! Years ago, when I doing youth work, I helped a youth group plan a trip to Myrtle Beach. Everyone in the youth group knew what to expect...beach, sand, waves, goofy golf, the Pavilion, and so on...everyone except one youth. We had a teenager in the youth group who had never seen the ocean. I don't remember anything else about that trip except our gathering to walk with him over the sand dunes to see the ocean. We wanted to see it through his eyes. We wanted to hear the waves through his ears. We wanted to be awed by the great expanse of sky and water as if for the first time.

The gift of the eyes of a stranger...sometimes it comes through another person, but sometimes it comes through putting ourselves in a strange place to look at the familiar. There's that wonderful scene from the movie *The Dead Poet's Society*: Here's a new teacher in the all-boys prep school trying to get his students see the familiar with a new set of eyes. These boys knew the school...knew the classrooms...knew the hallways...they were veterans. So how can this teacher get through to these students who already knew it all? He has them get up from their desks and stand up on their chairs. And they stand there looking around...somewhat embarrassed and sheepish but realizing that the familiar was not as familiar as they thought. So this past week, with the door closed to my office, I went and stood up on my chair. My familiar office for seventeen years took on a new shape. Yeah, there were cobwebs in the corner...but book titles jumped out at me...knickknacks took on new shapes...I was seeing things differently...more richly.

The gift of the eyes of the stranger...sometimes it comes by asking a different question. When we keep asking the same question, we get the same answer. How about a different question? About 40 years ago, Bobby Kennedy, who was running for president, adopted the stance of George Bernard Shaw. Kennedy's standard speech ended with a paraphrase of what that English writer and playwright Shaw had said. Kennedy would say: "Some people see things as they are and ask, 'Why?' I dream things that never were and ask, 'Why not?'"

The "why" question tends to bind us to the past...a good solid question...sort of like going to the priest to get checked off as free from leprosy. "Why" is not a bad question...unless it is our only question. "Why" tends to be quickly connected to "Who's to blame?" It is bound to the past. But the question, "Why not?" is less bound to the past and pulls us toward the future. The very question, "Why not?" invites us to see things with stranger eyes.

It is not just standing on chairs or asking a better question. Some of us put ourselves in strange places. One of our elders in his third year of service as elder came to me three years ago and said, "Here's what I have always done in this church...business, finance, administration, etc. I want to do something different." Be careful what you ask for! This elder has now been involved in our nurture program, learning about curriculum, and teacher recruitment, and confirmation classes, and the nursery. And to hear this elder talk, it is clear that this service to the church has given him new eyes...stranger eyes that are grateful and excited and pleased.

¹ Entire paragraph based on an observation by Fred B Craddock, *Luke*, page 203.

Here is the real kicker: this putting on of stranger eyes is exactly what God is doing in Jesus Christ. We sing the hymn, “Immortal, invisible God only wise in light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” That God becomes mortal, visible, limited, and vulnerable in Jesus. God puts on stranger eyes...to see as we see...to live as we live...to feel as we feel...to hurt as we hurt...to be abandoned and betrayed as we have felt abandoned and betrayed...to be tired and tempted, to be irritable and to give up...to know there are things we can't do and things we can't be for others. That is what we mean when we say Jesus is the incarnation...the “in the flesh” expression of God.

God puts on stranger eyes to see the way we do. And guess what? We are invited to see even as God sees...to put on God's eyes. Now that's an awesome and frightening invitation. Don't make me see as God sees...to love the unlovable...to forgive even those who do not ask for forgiveness...to be patient with some one else's failures and even my own...to live each day as new creation...as a gift. There are no eyes stranger than God's.

So, for example, poets and prophets in the Old Testament declare that the grace and kindness of God is new everyday...that this is the day the Lord has made...all things are being made new. My hunch is that all too often we have eyes for patterns, for regularity, for the fixedness of things—the “same-old-same-old.” There is nothing new under the sun.

Not so for God...each new day is a new creation, a new possibility, a new adventure. I think it was C.S. Lewis who reflected on this newness in God's vision of each day. How can God, who has seen billions of sunrises, see anything new in a day? How can there be joy or excitement or energy in this repetitiveness? Well, have you ever seen a toddler discover how to open and close a door? It goes like this. The toddler opens the door and their eyes grow wide and there is a giggle. The toddler closes the door and their eyes grow wide and there is a giggle. The toddler opens the door and their eyes grow wide and there is a giggle. The toddler closes the door and their eyes grow wide and there is a giggle. And this continues until some responsible adult says, “Quit and opening and shutting the door!”

Every day God's eyes grow wide and there's a giggle...how about this world! How about this life? What going to happen today?

Stranger eyes...the gift of those who are strange to us...the gift of taking a strange position...the gift of asking a new question...and the gift of looking at this world and our very lives in the strangest possible way...through God's eyes.

Tithing money is a lot easier than this...you write the check and it is “out of sight, out of mind.” But on this journey to Jerusalem, it is not just about where our feet will take us...it is about our sight...about what we will see. God intends a double blessing for you and me...the blessing of doing the right thing, following our duties, obeying what Jesus says. But claim the second blessing: see through stranger's eyes, even God's eyes.