

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This past week I wrote a reflection for our synod newsletter on the ELCA's churchwide assembly that I attended this past August. One of the things I mentioned in that reflection was appreciating the ethnic and racial diversity of those at the assembly. You may know that our denomination is statistically (by percentages) one of the whitest denominations in the country. We have been trying to broaden our diversity from our very beginning thirty-five years ago, and even before that in our predecessor church bodies. We have not managed to move the needle in that time, but we are still trying. We are electing as our voting members people of color at rates well beyond the percentages of our membership. And I am glad for that. Why? Well, of course because it is a good thing in and of itself to be inclusive in the church. The gospel is for all people, not just people who look and act like most of us. That's a no-brainer, right? But it is also a good thing for us in the overwhelming racial majority because it helps us to see better what is most important in the life of the church, to distinguish what is central and essential from what is not I'll give you a simple, silly example. I did my internship at a church that celebrated Oktoberfest every year outside on their parking lot, complete with actual beer, (yes beer at church!) and bratwurst, and an oom-pah band, and all the other Oktoberfest trappings. It was a fun and fine thing to do. I think that's where I was introduced to the chicken dance. But celebrating northern-European culture is not really what Lutheranism is about, not what is essential or central in what it means to be the church. If it were central, then why would we want non-European types to be members? And why would they want join us? But since that is not what Lutheranism is about, having members who don't fit the traditional northern-European stereotype actually helps us to distinguish between what is the essence of our faith and what is only incidental.

This dynamic is also present in our gospel reading today, and it's easy to miss. We usually treat this story as a lesson in being thankful. In fact, it's one of the gospel readings appointed for Thanksgiving Day services. These ten men are at a distance from their village because of their contagious skin disease. The Greek word here is leprosy, and you may have learned this as the story of the ten lepers. But leprosy in the ancient world covered a lot of things that aren't considered leprosy today, so "skin disease" is a better translation. At any rate, whatever the details of their condition, these men are in a biblical quarantine. They could be restored to their community only when their condition cleared up and they could demonstrate to the authorities, the priests, that they had been healed – something like a negative COVID test is needed to be able to return to work after coming down with the virus. That is why Jesus sends them off to get tested, as it were, and on the way they are healed. That could be the end of the story. Skin disease cured. Hurray for Jesus! But then one of them turns back and thanks Jesus, Jesus remarks that he is the only one who came back, and we learn from this that we ought to be more thankful. So that's the real lesson here, right? We'll try harder, Jesus!

Not so fast. There is a deeper problem being addressed here. This is not just about bad manners. Yes, the one who returned thanked Jesus. But if you read carefully, you'll notice that that is not, in fact, what Jesus comments on. This isn't about him not being thanked. What he remarks on is that only one of the ten praised *God* for his healing, that the nine did not make a connection between their healing and God. The Greek word translated as praise here can also mean "glory" or "credit." They did not give God credit. Jesus is revealing that the problem these men face goes more than skin deep. There is a problem in their relationship with God. The shorthand for that kind of problem is "sin." So, if you'll excuse a cute pun, the real problem here

is not a skin disease, but a “sin disease.” Their skin disease separates them only from their community, from their families and friends. Their “sin disease” separates from God, the source of life. Though now healed of a debilitating and isolating physical ailment, a yet deeper, more existential ailment remains uncured.

That is ultimately what this story, and indeed the entirety of Luke’s gospel, is trying to get us to acknowledge. Early in Luke is the Christmas story, the one with the angels and the shepherds. You might remember that the angel chorus erupts with a twofold message: “glory to God” and “peace on Earth,” that is to say, God gets the credit for what is happening in this newborn baby Jesus, and what is happening in him is peace – reconciliation between God and humankind and reconciliation in our broken relationships with one another and the world. That is still the message in this part of Luke’s Gospel as Jesus makes his way to the cross, where he will accomplish that reconciliation through his death and resurrection.

If we want to make sense of this story for us and our lives, we need to identify first with those nine who did not return to Jesus, who did not connect their healing, or perhaps anything else in their life, with God. It’s easy to do. There are lots of voices in our heads, in our media, and embedded in our culture, that lead us to take for granted the good things we have in life, that cause us to assume that health, happiness, and prosperity should be our default state, the way the world is meant to be, or even, as the advertisers like to tell us, that we *deserve* the good things in life. Those voices, I’m afraid, are symptoms of our “sin disease.” They turn our focus in on ourselves, and away from God and neighbor. They make us entitled and ungrateful.

“Sin disease” is just what Jesus came to deal with, to step into the chasm that our sinful human condition has opened up between us and God, to bridge that gap by his incarnation and life among us, and to cure our fatal sin disease by his death and resurrection. When this becomes the voice that speaks to us, when we are reminded of the message of the gospel in word and sacrament, which is the church’s central task, then the Holy Spirit gets to work to create faith and trust in God’s promises. And when that happens, when faith takes hold, we become like the Samaritan in the Gospel reading, the one who returned in thanks and praise of God, who upon noticing his healing couldn’t help but break out in praise of God. Faith, you see, makes itself known in praise and thanksgiving, in living each day joyfully acknowledging God’s love and care for us. The faith that reconnects us to God, as it is nurtured in Christian community and as it grows in our daily lives, penetrates to the depths of our souls and spills over into our relationship with our fellow humans and all of God’s creation. Faith, as Jesus told the Samaritan, makes us well, and in our wellness become agents of wellness for the world.

It took a foreigner to open the eyes of Jesus’ followers in this story, maybe because the foreigner was able to more easily see behind the necessary ritual of going to priests to be declared clean, and to appreciate its meaning, that God is the source of life and healing for all people. In a similar way, going back to how I began, the gift of diversity in our church body can help us to see behind the necessary ritual of our assemblies to the life-giving gospel that we are privileged to steward in Christ’s church. May we be inspired to continue to work toward such diversity so that we might more faithfully attend to our calling, the duty and delight of giving thanks and praise, and of sharing God’s gift of life within us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.