

FIRST LESSON: 2 Kings 5:1-3; 7-15
SECOND LESSON: Luke 17:11-19
October 9, 2022

“Gratitude”

Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

Our Old Testament and New Testament accounts overlap in some surprising ways today. The prophet Elisha came from Samaria, and the story of him healing Naaman took place at a time when Samaria was central to Israel, well before a series of conquests and exiles took place. Usually, I inflict history on you. This morning it is history AND geography! *You just have to trust me, it's for your own good. It will help you understand the bible much better.* So, brain cells awake for this one!

Samaria and what became Galilee was home to Israel. But around the year 722 BCE the Assyrians conquered the ten tribes of northern Israel, and in the time-honored practice of the day, exiled much of the population to modern day Syria and Iraq. Of course, they did not succeed in taking out the entire population, but they took a lot of people, including the leadership and upper classes, and then moved in their own people. Assimilation was inevitable. The ten tribes disappeared from history. People have come up with all kinds of creative ideas for what happened to them. The Mormons claim that they are the Native Americans, and one of their own scientists got in terrible trouble when he pointed out that that was genetically impossible. What we need to know is that what had been the northern Kingdom of Israel was gone, although we have many of their stories and perspective in scripture. But the southern part of the nation dominated by Judah survived until about 598 when the same thing nearly happened to them.

Judah was conquered by the Babylonians and exiled. But this exile proved to be shorter, only about 70 years, because Babylon itself fell to Persia, and the Persian king allowed the people to return. Judah was larger and more cohesive than the tribe of Benjamin, and it is from Judah that the word “Jewish” comes.

By the time of the New Testament geographically Israel was divided into three parts. The top section where Jesus came from was Galilee. Galilee had been made almost empty because of the Assyrian exile until about a century before Christ when a southern Jewish king made a concerted effort to resettle people there. The Galileans therefore, were also Judeans. In the middle was Samaria. The population was a thoroughly blended mix of Israelite and Assyrian peoples. The southernmost section, Judah, were purists who believed the city of Jerusalem to be the holy city and rejected all earlier holy places, which now happened to be located in semi-pagan Samaria. There was enormous hostility between the two groups, and it helps to know this background every time a Samaritan enters the picture in the New Testament.

While Elisha might have come from Samaria, that address meant something quite different by the time of Jesus.

Both of our stories today involve healing leprosy. "Leprosy" could be actual Hansen's Disease, the terrible wasting disease we think of as leprosy, but it could also be a lot of other things. They didn't know what was contagious and what was not so they took no chances. Really bad eczema could be called leprosy. Ringworm, psoriasis, skin cancer, any number of things could be identified by the local priest as leprosy, and when it was it was like a death sentence for the person concerned. The infected person was to be removed from society, forced to live outside the town and stand at a distance from all healthy people. This was true in Judah, Samaria and Galilee. When coming into contact with another person they were to shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" to give fair warning. And to make matters worse, (if that's possible) people tended to regard leprosy as a divine judgment, so lepers were not treated with compassion. Clearly, they had brought it on themselves.

Now Naaman was not an Israelite or Judean. He was from Syria. And he was also a powerful man, so his leprosy did not have the same social consequences as it had for the man in Jesus' time. But it must have bothered him. There was still a stigma. And when given the chance for healing he took it. But being an important person, he expected to be given the full treatment! He expected this prophet to wave his hands over him and pronounce mysterious words. Elisha did none of that. Elisha didn't even meet with him in person. What an insult. Instead, he sent a messenger to him, telling him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." Naaman was furious. But his wise compatriots were able to talk him into doing it, and in doing so he was healed. Humility was part of the equation.

In our story from the New Testament Jesus was in the border region between Samaria and Galilee. Borders are not always easy places to live. They tend to be not one thing or the other. Loyalties can be split. Jealousy and envy of the other can flare. But this was a village where at least the outcasts banded together. Ten lepers saw him at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

Jesus saw them. This sounds obvious, but how often do we not see people. We somehow manage to not "see" the homeless person on the corner. We deliberately avoid looking at someone who is begging because we know that eye contact is fatal. With eye contact they will make their pitch. Some beggars are more proficient than top salesman. They work to pin us down and try to negotiate. They employ both guilt and flattery. And many of us avoid this not just because it is uncomfortable but because we know that in our city and neighborhoods most of these people are addicts and we know what that money will go towards. But as a society we do need to "see" these people by providing shelters and rehabs. And it is always possible to bring food and clothing to those who would otherwise have none.

People have always known how to "not see" someone who will place a demand on them. But Jesus had no such concern. Jesus saw them. He saw them fully, as people in a desperate condition. He didn't judge them and

conclude that it was all their own fault. He simply responded to the dire need. He said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And in the process of going, they were cleansed.

Only one came back to thank Jesus. The others were so ecstatic about their healing that all they could think of was getting permission to go home. But this one man came back, threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And this man was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." "Made you well" is a bit of a lame translation, because it really says "your faith has saved you." All ten must have been thankful. But only one returned to express his thanks and gratitude to God. And the blessing he received as a result surpassed that of his healing alone.

"Thank you." It's what every parent tells their children to say, isn't it? A gift is given. Junior is ready to run off and play with it, but they're stopped in their tracks. "What do you say?" A quick "thank you" emerges before they make their escape. I remember those forced "thank yous" too, and it's not that they're pointless, but they don't begin to capture what is really required, which is gratitude. A spoiled child with an abundance of things is rarely thankful. They don't realize what they have. But a child who knows that money is tight and things don't come easily, is much more likely to be thankful.

When gratitude shapes our lives we live differently, fully, joyfully. Some people are more naturally happy and bubbly. They're like Winnie the Pooh. Others are natural Eeyores, always seeing the down side of life. Gratitude as a lifestyle can be acquired through practice, however. And there are steps we can take.

First, we can PAY ATTENTION to our whole life situation. Sometimes it helps to look back on the bad times and be grateful for where we are today. I do that a lot. Even in bad circumstances there is always something good, something we can thank God for. The Samaritan leper who was healed was thankful for a healed body and a restored life. I'm thankful that I have furniture. I'm thankful that I have a home. I'm thankful for food. I'm thankful for clothing. I'm thankful for my family. I'm thankful for my aging dogs, even when they pee on the hardwood floors and damage them. I have a floor! Many people in Pakistan today don't.

Second, we can PAY ATTENTION to the present moment. The beauty of the sky. Leaves falling. The warmth of the sun. And as our day goes on, we can pay attention to small kindnesses offered and we can say "thank you" and mean it. A thank you from the heart is a channel of God's grace to others.

And finally, we can **pay attention to God**, creating moments of silence in our day to listen for the still small voice within and thanking God. Gratitude slows our life down so we can actually experience living instead of rushing from one thing to the next. Gratitude doesn't just bring us a better life, like the Samaritan leper who was healed, it brings us life itself. Amen.

5 Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

2 Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. **3** She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

7 As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

8 When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." **9** So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's

house. **10** Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

11 But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. **12** Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

13 Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" **14** So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Luke 17:11-19

11 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. **12** As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance **13** and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

14 When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

15 One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. **16** He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

17 Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? **18** Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" **19** Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."