

**Christ Church in Harwich Port, MA**  
**Sermon for October 13, 2013 Luke 17**      **Judith Davis, Rector**

“O Jesus, thou hast promised to all who follow thee  
that where thou art in glory there shall thy servant be.  
And Jesus, I have promised      to serve thee to the end;  
O give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend.”<sup>1</sup>

This last verse of “O Jesus I have promised” was written for confirmations of the author’s children in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The author, John Bode was an Anglican priest in England. What strikes me about this whole hymn, but especially this verse, is that it is about our commitment to Christ and our willingness to serve him even when we feel somehow abandoned by God or the Church.

And so today I see the scripture texts for this Sunday are all about healing and faith and believing that if we have enough faith we will be healed. Well, it doesn’t always work, does it? Our collective hearts are broken this day as we grieve for our brother Mac, who was not healed to be with us in this life. Now that doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in the healing love of Jesus, because I do. But one thing I’ve learned over the years of life and ministry is that healing isn’t always what we think it is.

Regardless of being restored to health, Mac followed Jesus as a priest for almost 40 years. He was one of God’s faithful servants; he always cared for the least and lost of God’s people, the homeless, the troubled youth, the downtrodden, the oppressed. He brought healing love to those he met and to those among whom he ministered. He worked hard in spite of his own health problems, especially being a diabetic for almost 40 years. He and his surgeon had figured that they had weighed the risks of his back surgery. The surgery went well. He was joking with me about the penthouse view of the harbor from the sixth floor of the hospital and he was watching baseball, of course, and feeling good and looking forward to coming home on Thursday. Having a sudden heart attack from which he could not recover was not in the plan. I had planned to visit him on Wednesday after the clergy luncheon where I told our colleagues how well he was doing. Giving him last rites instead was not in my plan, but rather teasing him, as usual, was. I walked away from the hospital with Kathie and I was heartbroken for my colleague and buddy.

So when I looked at the reading today from Second Kings about the healing of Naaman, I wondered yet again about healing. Naaman thought that Elisha would do

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<sup>1</sup> Hymn, “O Jesus, I have promised” (*The Hymnal 1982* #655)

some important healing thing or magic, I suppose, when all Elisha said was to wash in the Jordan River seven times. So, reluctantly, Naaman did that, and much to his surprise, he was healed and then he believed in the God of Israel.

Then we have the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers in the region between Samaria and Galilee. Some of the lepers may have been Jews, but at least one was a Samaritan, and he returned to thank Jesus for healing him. Jesus told him his faith had made him well. Last week in the first part of Luke 17, the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, and he tells them to be faithful and carry out their work and they will show their faith by their actions. Then we have this healing story which is also about faith. Martin Luther said this about the story in Luke;

“Faith and love constitute the whole character of the Christian. Faith receives, love gives. Faith brings man to God, love brings man to his fellow. Through faith he permits God to do him good; through love he does good to his brother man.”<sup>2</sup>

We are reminded in this story of Jesus’ care for the marginalized (here ten lepers and at least one of them doubly marginalized, a Samaritan); we are also reminded of the appropriate response to Jesus, a response of faithful recognition and gratitude. It is not unusual for the two to occur together in Luke; the marginalized seem well placed to see him for who he is as he has seen them for who they are.

Jesus finds himself in an in-between place as he is on the way to Jerusalem. He is in the region between Samaria and Galilee; Jesus frequents boundary spaces and is about to cross a social boundary again by his association with lepers and with a Samaritan.

Cleansing of lepers is an identifying marker for Jesus’ mission earlier in Luke 7 when John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to Jesus; they said ‘John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”’ Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’ This episode also evokes the story of Naaman the Syrian, the Hebrew Bible lectionary text for today, which Jesus mentions in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4:27 in his hometown when he reads

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<sup>2</sup> V:62-101 of *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, published by Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, MI, 1983).

from the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus says then, “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” His attention to outsiders and marginalized people is evident from the start, and he highlights it in that speech, in response to which his hometown audience tries to throw him off a cliff. Here, as in the story of Naaman the Syrian, the recipient of healing and grace is a foreigner (although in an interesting twist we find that, in the case of Naaman, the prophet Elisha is from Samaria).<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt something to be understood here about the people who live on the margins of our communities, who are treated as invisible or unlovely because of how they look or who they are or where they come from. Jesus clearly notices and loves them and calls us to do the same.

But we might also consider the parts of us that are hidden in the borderlands of ourselves where we may least want to be seen and most need to be touched. Jesus, who is not afraid of borderlands, does not mind meeting us in those places, and it may be that by recognizing him there, we will find in our deepest selves a new outpouring of the grateful love that makes well.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the relation between healing and salvation, as depicted by Luke, we will need to consider another distinction, one made often these days in both medical and popular literature, the distinction between healing and cure. We believe in both curing and healing, but they are not always the same. I believe that sometimes we are not cured in this life, but we are healed and made whole in the life to come. That doesn't mean I don't pray for curing.

Why in this story are ten cleansed but only one sees the healing? Why do some see and some do not? Why do some believe and some do not? Why do some encounter God in their healing and some do not? The act of coming to faith remains a mystery, it seems. Being well is life in the kingdom-- life lived in the expectation and reality of deliverance in the end time. We do not receive all the answers to our questions in this life or in these stories. But we believe in the power of Christ's healing love. We believe that healing occurs in the presence of God's spirit with us, but most of all, we

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<sup>3</sup> Working preacher blog: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1786](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1786)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

believe in the power of the resurrection to eternal life for those who believe in the power of God in Christ.

I wanted for Mac the healing the Samaritan received. I wanted Mac to be cured and to be made whole among us. I want that for all of us, but as St. Paul said, now we see partially and one day we will see wholly, when we are in God's presence forever.

What do we learn from the Samaritan and Jesus? The tenth leper's faithful, untainted gratitude for God's mercy is humbling to see. He realizes that life is a gift, that just to get up each day is grace.

Let us go from here today resolved to care more for our neighbor. Let us go from here resolved to be more aware of seeing those who need Christ's healing love. Let us not be afraid to see those from whom others would turn away. And let us live today in its fullness, in the gift of the life we have this day. And let us be thankful.

I have a lot of questions for God one day. Especially I have the question about why some die before their time and some seem not to be restored to health and wholeness that we can see. I don't know why Mac had to die, but I do know that even so, I believe in the power of the Resurrection to wholeness in eternal life and like Thomas Merton in last week's prayer, I believe that if I keep on having the desire to please God in what I do, that God will lead me by the right road, even if I cannot see it. But I also know this, that even in the sorrow of this week, I know that God has given each of us this community of faith where we hold each other up when we're falling and where we remind each other of the power of God's healing love in our lives, where we can grieve together and where we can rejoice together as well. May God give us faith to see the power of God's love even in the midst of the things we do not understand and let us resolve to be faithful, like Mac was, to the end.

“O Jesus, thou hast promised to all who follow thee  
that where thou art in glory there shall thy servant be.  
And Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end;  
O give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend. Amen”