

Luke 17:11-19

In the name of our God, whose mercy is endless.

This year has been called a year of mercy in the Catholic Church. The year has been marked by many churches and cathedrals around the world opening their doors. These doors are doors of mercy, and when you walk in, you can be assured you have been met by God's mercy. I was in Ireland this summer and found a cathedral with open doors of mercy and was surprised by the power of it--I walked through the doors, sat down, and experienced a taste of God's endless mercy. It was this moving encounter of forgiveness, embrace, and deep understanding—and after I left I walked into a town of people who were not just in the church with me. Probably a town, like many others, of people who don't believe in God, have been hurt by their church or, perhaps most common than any other, have broken understandings of who God is--that God is not one who really would forgive, or who still loves, that God is not the one who waits for us to say yes or who opens the door of mercy we long to walk through.

In our gospel today we hear of Jesus' response to ten lepers who ask for mercy. Luke is known as the evangelist of mercy. The petition of these people, who were considered repulsive, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us," is met with Jesus telling them to go and show themselves to the priests. As they go they are healed, we are not told if they made it all the way to the priests, this passage doesn't say if the priests help at all—but presumably they are healed of their disease. The miracle of healing, the receiving of mercy seems so glamorous - so dazzling - and surely in ways it is—is part of our faith and I know those of you who have participated in the Living our Faith series have wrestled with this-- but what I think is so interesting about this gospel passage is that this story points not towards the healing so much as the blessing from God received after.

Of the ten lepers cleansed, only one leper in this gospel returns to thank God for the healing he receives. *Only one* responds to God for the mercy given. It may be that each of these lepers were cleansed from their skin disease—but the unique response of the Leper from Samaria—this person who would have been considered lower than dogs—not only a leper – repulsive - but a leper from Samaria. Jews did not speak to people from Samaria. They did not even acknowledge them as human beings. This leper from Samaria is the one who serves as our example of how we respond to God’s grace.

After receiving mercy, he returns to God and gives thanks—with all of himself—his body was healed in this story but he gives thanks with his body, voice, and spirit. He acknowledges this new freedom is not his to keep to himself but is a gift. It is not something to be taken and then quickly move on. He recognizes the gravity of what has happened and in doing this he is blessed. As he leaves this encounter with God he can go away without doubt of the mercy and love he received, without doubt of what he has been, what happened to him and without doubt of who Jesus Christ is. He does not question the source of this mercy. He does not take it for granted. And in doing this he is given the assurance of faith.

And it is Christ’s blessing that makes this man’s healing full. There are times when we need to ask for mercy but there are times when something we receive is from God. When this happens, we can thank God and go away in full acknowledgment of what we have been given. As I walked around that town in Ireland I began to wonder, to question the mercy I’d just received. But it was in returning that I found blessing—a reassurance of faith—and that at least to me goes a long way-- providing protection from disbelief and strength and confidence to be more of a blessing to others.

And this kind of interchange we all experience--is a reason why I love church—because wherever we are—in need of God’s mercy or with thanks of what has been given to us--this morning, like every Sunday-- we gather in acknowledgement of God’s mercy and we gather for communion around the table that Jesus set for us and participate in thanksgiving. We share this prayer together--the words we

share at the beginning—the Lord be with you, and also with you, lift up your heart. What you say is the beginning of our shared prayer—a prayer of thanks and praise for all God has done for us.

And here we all are—whether we always know it or not—he we all are thanking God or, at times, asking God for God’s mercy and love.

And it is lovely to do this in community. For there are times when you know your need for mercy and there are times when you know how grateful you are—there are times when we’re not aware of either-- and however it is that we come here we meet one another—we gather with others who can hold, help and remind us of this while they also recognize their own desire for mercy or their own joy in thanksgiving. God’s mercy continues and we receive it here as the lepers did thousands of years ago-- and wherever we encounter God, God’s blessing waits for us, too with the assurance of our faith in Him and his mercy.

We are a community bound and built by God’s mercy and goodness. Thus, we are a community built upon gratitude. We come here with a recognition that there is more to our lives than what comes from our own might or skill. And how extraordinary is that. Each one of us here recognizes consciously or not we are not complete by ourselves. We acknowledge together here a power greater than us and a God who’s mercy we need—and we come here to be blessed in that. This acknowledgment of a God who is greater than we are is an act of respect and reverence---a recognition our own our humanity. We do not come to this service alone, we do not receive God’s blessing just by or for ourselves and here, we can be blessed by each other and be a blessing to others in front of God. It is a beautiful thing.

And Jesus shows us how. It is a gift if we let it be, this reminder that we return to God and give thanks. And we can practice that now, and we can lift each other up in faith, with faith that God is here with us, still giving mercy to those who ask and still blessing all of us who continue in this relationship. And we can be a support to each other as we continue to see and share that God’s mercy really has shaped our

life—as we share the blessing of faith—of belief that Christ, our God, has shown us mercy—let us be a blessing to each other and give thanks with all that we are.