

Worship for February 11, 2024

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship Psalm 100

Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness.

Come into God's presence with singing!

**For the Lord is a gracious God,
whose mercy is everlasting;
and whose faithfulness endures to all generations.**

*Hymn 33 Praise the Lord! God's Glories Show

Prayer

**Almighty God,
you have taught us that all our deeds without love are worth nothing.
Send your Holy Spirit to pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love,
the very bond of peace and of all goodness;
forgive us where we have failed to show your love and bear one another's sorrow, and turn
us to your way,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.

I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ,
you are forgiven.

May the God of mercy,
who forgives all your sins,
strengthen you in all goodness,
and by the power of the Holy Spirit
keep you in eternal life. Amen.

Old Testament Reading

Moments With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading

Morning Message

Pastor Debie Thomas says she remembers well the day when she was snooping in her father's study. She was four years old and bored. She began rummaging thru his files and found a manila envelope. She looked inside to find a small bundle wrapped in tissue paper. It held four little blue books. Upon opening one of the books she was delighted to find a baby picture of herself. There were a lot of big words in the books which she couldn't read. She took a pencil from her father's desk and began doodling in the one that held her picture.

Her father came into the study at some point and shouted at her, "What are you doing? " And he grabbed the book out of her hands. She said he immediately set to work carefully erasing her drawings, his hands shaking.

"What are they?" Debie asked.

"Our passports, " he said. These are our American passports. They prove we belong here. Without them..." he didn't finish that sentence.

Even now, years later, Debie says she remembers her father's fear that day. It was the immigrant fear of not belonging, of being cast out.

To this day, Debie treats her passport with great care, as though it might disintegrate in her hands. The memory of her father's reaction to the defacing of her passport is a reminder of how seriously he took his citizenship and his role in keeping his family safe.

he night we were to make the return trip to the US from Ireland with a school group, I couldn't find my passport. I took everything out of my purse more than once, searched my luggage and carry-on and Ed had pulled out the copy he makes of everyone's passport when we travel with a group. I finally found it- safely tucked away in a little hidden pocket of my purse. In fact, it was that episode that alerted me that I had growing cataracts. Passports are dark blue and I just couldn't see it against the black leather.

The scripture text points to at least three things for our attention. One is healing. Jesus healed ten very sick people. One is gratitude. One leper returned to Jesus to express his gratitude. And one is identity.

Within this text we find questions of inclusion and exclusion, exile and return. Debie Thomas says, as the daughter of immigrants, she feels these questions deep in her bones. They aren't intellectual or abstract. They are emotional and urgent. Where is home? What is my identity? Her security is bound up in these questions.

A few years after that day in the study, Debie's family travelled to India, her parents' homeland.

One day while waiting in line at a village train station, her little brother pointed to two people huddled in a corner. “What’s wrong with them?” he asked.

They had been in India about two weeks by this time. They were getting used to seeing beggars, women with rail-thin babies on their hips, men who were blind or lame, at the mercy of passers-by for a few coins a day. Debie and her brother had never witnessed such devastating need and were moved to help with whatever change or small bills their parents could spare.

But somehow these two at the train station seemed different. They were in need but their appearance scared Debie. She didn’t want to approach them. Didn’t want to drop a few coins in their hands. They were missing fingers, their feet were mere stumps. Their faces were misshapen.

“They’re sick,” said their father. “They have leprosy.”

And though the train station and the city streets were crowded that day, what struck Debie was how very alone those two seemed to be. She says it was like an invisible barrier, solid as granite, separated them from the rest of humanity, rendering them untouchable. The disease was frightening, but what frightened her more was their isolation, their not-belonging.

The lepers in the text also lived in the shadows, in the region “in-between.” It was a no-man’s land. They were required to live in seclusion, to keep their distances from others. They had to warn the public by announcing, “Unclean! Unclean!” whenever they came close.

When Jesus heals their disease, he also restores their identities. He enables them to return to their families and their communities. They could enjoy human interaction once again. They had a place to belong. They could go home.

He healed ten, but only one returned to thank Jesus. I think we miss the point if we say the others weren’t grateful. We know they were. But this one man has the deck stacked against him. He was a Samaritan. He was a “double other.” He was marginalized by both illness and foreignness. Jews and Samaritans bore years of enmity. They disagreed about where to worship God and how to interpret the scriptures. They avoided interaction with each other.

This reminds me of the first time Ed and I were in Ireland. We were talking with the host at the bed and breakfast where we spent the night. Our plan was to take the train into Dublin. The host informed us that U2 was giving a concert that night in the city, so it would be crowded. And unsafe.

“And mind your purse, dear,” the woman warned me, “The damn English will be there.”

Debie Thomas suggests that this man in the text, by virtue of his disease and his foreignness, is enabled to see his truest place of belonging lies at the feet of Jesus. Jesus embraces all of him-leper, foreigner, exile.

So, what are we to take from this story? In a much less dramatic way, we have probably all experienced the discomfort of being alone, or new, or unfamiliar. Discomfort is a far cry from rejection though. Immigrants are still held suspect, depending on their country of origin. The poor, those reliant on welfare. There's a local political ad running about that right now. Makes me angry every time I see it. We don't hear much about it now, but HIV/AIDS is devastating to those who suffer from the disease and those who suffer as family and loved ones. I'll speak more on that some week.

More than a year ago now, Ed and I are participated in our nephew's wedding, doing things we do every week in worship with no nerves at all. But the size of the sanctuary, the power of the organ, the massive marble altar and beautiful shrines are enough to take your breath away.

When we visited on a night before the wedding, I felt like I didn't belong there. It's a basilica, for heaven's sake.

But, the most lovely thing happened. The church music director was extremely hospitable, showing Ed around the organ and showing me all around the sanctuary, leading me up to the pulpit. He took me on a tour, describing the artwork, the beautifully carved statues, the fresh red roses that are replaced several times a week at the feet of the shrine of the infant king, the statue of the pregnant Mary, holding a Bible, bearing God's Word, in word and in person, into the world.

It was evident that here was a place where you could truly worship God with all the senses. It was very reassuring, comforting. I was realized that we fit just fine because our ultimate, eternal, most satisfying home is with Jesus.

Jesus is home for the well and the sick, the immigrant and the native-born, Jesus is home for Catholics and Protestants. Jesus is home for the faithful in prayer and for babies in the cry room. Jesus is home for those who live in luxury and for those who have no place to lay their heads. Jesus is home for those who have left the children of earth behind them to enter the realm of heaven. That gives me great comfort today.

And those who recognize home when they find it, can do none other than fall to their knees in gratitude.

May it be so for all of us. Amen.

*Hymn 692 Spirit, Open My Heart

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

**Blessed are you, O God of all creation,
through your goodness we have these gifts to share.
Accept and use our offerings for your glory
and for the service of your kingdom. Amen.**

*Hymn 693 Though I May Speak

*Blessing

Go now, and give your life to the Lord.

Trust in God and do good.

Love and bless everyone, even your enemies.

Do not judge others, but be merciful and generous to all.

Treat others as you would have them treat you.

And may God be quick to act on your behalf,

may Christ Jesus raise you to new and everlasting life;

and may the Holy Spirit go before you to prepare a place for you. Amen.

*Postlude