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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

October 9, 2022

Year C, Proper 23, Revised Common Lectionary

[2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c](#)

[Psalm 111](#)

[2 Timothy 2:8-15](#)

[Luke 17:11-19](#)

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“The saying is sure,” Paul says. He’s an old man, imprisoned for Jesus’ sake, held in chains of iron, looking ahead to the day of his martyrdom, looking back on his ministry, holding tight to what he knows is stronger than any chain. Maybe he quotes a fragment of praise they are used to singing in one of his churches; or maybe he simply coins these lines himself; either way, he knows the saying is sure: “If we have died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him.” For everything that suffer in Christ, there will be a glorious reward. The parallelism of the poetry leads him onward: two lines on the promise of reward: and so now he turns to the consequences of failure. “If we deny him, he will deny us.” And then a surprise: “If we are faithless—” here we expect to hear “he will be faithless to us.” But Paul writes, “If we are faithless—he remains faithful! For he cannot deny himself.”

Hear this stunning, astonishing contradiction: from one line to the next everything has changed. Paul starts with reward, moves to punishment—but then he just can’t make himself stay there. as the joy, the effervescence, of God’s unquenchable love

wells up and overflows in him. I imagine him, there, in his cell, dictating: starting the line, perhaps, intending the parallelism—then being surprised himself at what comes out of his mouth: “If we are faithless—he *remains* faithful!

“For he cannot deny himself.”

We are so deeply connected to God in Jesus Christ that we are actually part of his very self. Yes, as Christians when we are baptized we are grafted into the very life of Jesus Christ and become part of him, part of his body. And his love for us surges through every cell of that body and cannot, will not let us go.

What kind of God is this who holds on tight to us in spite of our faithlessness?

This is the God we meet in the story of the prodigal son: the story of a father who showers an inheritance on his child, watches with longing as his child rejects his love, wanders far off and squanders all the gifts so richly given, and then waits with eager yearning, ready to welcome the faithless child back with love and honor and lavish feasting the minute he comes back within sight. This is a God who gives gifts freely, who cares not a bit for dignity, whose concern is not for his son to perform good behavior but simply for his son’s presence, the child he yearns for, in whom he takes delight.

We need to hear that yearning in Jesus’ voice in our gospel today as he asks, wistfully, longingly: were not ten lepers healed? And where are the other nine? Did only one come back to give thanks and praise to God?

It is so easy to come to this story, shaped by our culture and our experiences, and to read it as a moralistic fable about giving thanks as an example of good behavior. Maybe we were taught to write thank you notes when we were children for gifts that didn't particularly excite us—or for gifts that *did* excite us, so much so that it was much more appealing to be somewhere off playing with the gift than to sit down with a pen and paper and diligently produce the required token of gratitude.

Now thank-you notes are a good and lovely thing. And it is right and it is important to teach children to be polite and considerate. But this is not a fable about our need to write thank-you notes to God. This is not a lesson teaching us that we had better say our proper prayers of gratitude when God gives us something or else God will probably not be in the mood to give us something next time. This is a story of the overflowing love of God, that depends not one bit on our merits but simply on the fact that we are God's children on whom God delights to shower an inheritance. *All ten* of the lepers are healed. The gift is given with no strings attached. In fact, the other nine are just doing what Jesus told them to do: go and show themselves to the priests. But one, this Samaritan foreigner, finds something else happening within himself: that overflowing love of God is welling up into a desire of his own, an answering love that has to be expressed in praise. And that answering love is what you and I were created for. The Samaritan has begun to be fully human.

Alexander Schmemann, the great Russian Orthodox theologian, wrote that human beings were created to be the priests of creation.¹ Our vocation is to be the voice of everything that God has made: to offer it all back to God in thanksgiving and praise.

¹ See, among many other places in his writings, *For the Life of the World*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1973), 92-94.

Julia and I share our home with a small calico cat named Ceili. Ceili is a good cat, and much beloved by us: and I think she also loves us in the way of loving that is proper to a cat. She can curl up with us and purr. She can meow at us conversationally; and she can ask, in her own way, with great insistence, to be fed. One thing Ceili cannot do, though, is give thanks: at least not on her own. A cat doesn't have words or language. It takes a human being to be the articulator of the thanksgiving that we offer on behalf of the whole creation: sun and moon, land and sea, plants and animals and all that is. This is what we will do here in a few minutes, when we offer the Great Thanksgiving: because of course that is what the Greek word *eucharist* means: thanksgiving. We are created to be eucharistic beings. And as Father Schmemann says, none of us succeeds: like Eve and Adam, we all fall away from our priestly calling to live lives that are an offering of thanks and praise. But in Jesus God has done what we could not.²

Jesus has become the first of all humanity to be truly eucharistic. In his birth, ministry, healings, eating and drinking with sinners, voluntary suffering and death, and glorious resurrection and ascension, Jesus' entire life is one mighty offering of thanksgiving and praise. Into that offering we have been incorporated as bodily members of the living Jesus Christ: and in him we begin to offer his own sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in our own lives. We do it haltingly, stumbling and falling away, but even when we are faithless he remains faithful: for he cannot deny his own self.

² *For the Life of the World*, 37.

If we let it, his abundant life within us will overflow in ways we can only imagine. It will transform how we live: how we treat our fellow children of God, how we treat our fellow creatures of God the animals, the plants, the oceans and air, how we spend our money, how we use our time, who we understand ourselves to be.

We are here to celebrate Eucharist. We are here to offer thanksgiving. We are here to be transformed, like the Samaritan, to become truly human. Glory and praise to this lavish God who yearns for us with an overflowing love.