

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 9, 2016
Proper 23, Year C

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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

From Jeremiah: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This letter from Jeremiah to the exiles sets the pattern for how Jews have lived around the world ever since. The dispersion of the Jewish people around the world is called the "diaspora." The word connotes the scattering of seed. As the chosen people of God, they have a vocation to be a blessing and be a vehicle for blessing wherever they find themselves. Since we Christians have been grafted into God's people by God's grace working through the person of Jesus, we have the same vocation to be a vehicle of God's blessing to every town and city that we find ourselves.

This past Friday and Saturday I made a quick trip to the Adirondacks to fetch Her Majesty, the ancestral Christmas cactus, back here to her winter home at St. Michael's. While I was there, I ran into the Reverend Milton Dudley. Milton was classmate of mine at seminary and for the last twenty or so years has been the pastor of the Keene Valley Congregational Church. This is the only year-round church in this small village. Milton is now newly retired, and I also met a person who was on the search committee for his successor. She told how the committee had to explain to every candidate that the job entailed not only be a pastor to the congregation, but also being a chaplain to the entire

town, whether or not they came to church. Milton understood that thoroughly, and carried it off nearly flawlessly.

Here in Litchfield, which is about ten times the size of Keene Valley, our vocation is no different. We are not St. Michael's church, but St. Michael's parish. Our responsibilities do not end with these walls. We are to work for the welfare of the entire town and all who dwell therein. Like the exiles in Babylon, and the Jews in all the centuries since, we are to be the seed scattered in this New England soil to produce God's crop of blessings.

In this time of post-Christian society, when it is counter-cultural to attend church and be a regular part of what is so inaccurately called "organized religion"—I often wonder what makes anyone think we are organized!—in this secular age and place, God invites to look around and see what God is up to all around us outside of these beloved walls. And when we discern that divine activity, we will join in God's purposes and take part in the building of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Just as it was for those ancient Jews in Babylon, so it is for us. Each household, every synagogue, every church, every Christian community is an outpost of the Kingdom of God. Each is a beachhead, established on the ground in this fallen world. Whenever we establish such an outpost, we then are called to relate to the world around us.

In building our relationships with those around us and among we live, we can learn from the wisdom of family systems theory. To establish healthy relationships two things are necessary. First, a person needs to be a self. They have to have their own identity and to have clear boundaries. They need to know where they leave off and the other person begins. For a church community that means we need to be clear what it means to be a Christian and how that is different from being something else. Second, to be in a

relationship, every person needs to acknowledge the other person's humanity. There needs to be a felt commonality, an empathy based on our common humanity. For the Church that means we need to see, as the Quakers put it, the light of God in every human being. We do not have a monopoly on the presence of God, for God is at work in every human heart.

These themes are all at play in the Gospel reading for today. The story starts with the identification of boundaries. Jesus traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, and this takes him through the region of Samaria. This is both a geographical and religious boundary. The Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom before the exile, and the first King set up worship centers to compete with Jerusalem. Thus the Samaritans were considered by the Jews of Judea as apostate or at schismatic. The text is not explicit about the identities or origins of these ten men, except that we are told at the end that at least one was a Samaritan. Third, there was a boundary created by the nature of their disease. The leprosy with which the ten men were afflicted may not have been the Hansen's Disease of our own day. It was disfiguring and believed to be highly contagious. Thus the Torah described how a person so infected had to be separated from the rest of the community. The Law also mandated that if a person recovered from the skin disease, he had to show himself to a priest who would examine him and declare him whole and ready to be re-admitted to the fellowship of the community. When they call to Jesus for help, Jesus responds and they are healed. Jesus does not need to touch them in this case. He allows their own faith to heal them. Indeed, they leave to go to the priest even before they are healed, and then they are healed as they follow Jesus' instructions.

Finally, one returns to Jesus to praise God for his deliverance. After Jesus expresses his disappointment that only one returned, he declares that this man was healed by his

own faith. Healing comes when the our common humanity transcends the boundaries that tell us who we are.

The last theme of the Gospel reading is the importance of praise and thanksgiving. Only one of those who were healed said "Thank you." How often do we say thank you to God? The kind of worship we do every week is called the Eucharist. When the church began about two thousand years ago, most people spoke Greek. Eucharist is the Greek word for Thanksgiving. We give thanks every week to God for all the things he has done for us. Great, huge, humongous things, like sending Jesus to remove all our wounds and to restore us to friendship with each other and with God. Big things like our families and friends. Big things like when someone who was sick gets well. And little things like flowers and squirrels and autumn leaves and cookies.

Saying thank you is not merely a way to be polite. Saying thank you is a way of life. What was the last gift you received? What was the occasion? Birthday? Christmas? Somebody returning from a trip? Did you say thank you? What about this week. Has anything good happened to you? What about today? Did you see the sun ? What about the air? The colors on the trees. In fact, since God is giving us gifts all the time, we should be saying thank you all of the time. Take a look around now and point to something that makes you glad and we'll all say thank you.

So we learn that we are to be clear about our boundaries and about our common humanity with those who are not us. We are to work for the well-being of all our neighbors. We are called to a life of expectancy, faith, and thanksgiving. What a great way to live! Let us practice these things until it becomes a habit, part of our character. Until nothing is not a blessing, and no blessing goes unthanked.