

Proper 23c, 2019
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
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2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c Psalm 111 2 Timothy 2:8-15 Luke 17:11-19

“Your faith has made you well.”

The book “In the Sanctuary of Outcasts” is a memoir written by Neil White, a man sentenced to serve eighteen months in jail for bank fraud. Going to jail for bank fraud is not unusual. What **is** unusual about Mr. White’s jail term is that he served it in Carville, LA, in an isolated mansion that served as quarantine for people with Hansen’s disease. In other words, Neil White went to jail in the last open leper colony in the United States. His is not an old story; the colony closed in 1999. The residents are described as “a small circle of outcasts who had forged a tenacious, clandestine community, a fortress to repel the cruelty of the outside world.” (From the back cover of the book.) So cruel is the outside world to people with leprosy that a similar colony in Hawaii, which closed in 1969, had residents who stayed there into this century. Their Hansen’s disease had long been healed, but their “leper” status remained.

In Jesus’ time, the law required people with leprosy to live in isolation, apart from their families, outside the city gates, to wear torn clothes, keep their distance from others, and announce themselves to strangers by yelling “Unclean! Unclean!” Being afflicted with Hansen’s disease, leprosy, or anything that resembled the ailment, rendered one a complete outcast. These are the people who approached Jesus and begged for healing.

Ten people were healed, and the only one who came back to Jesus and thanked him was a person from Samaria. A despised, probably Gentile foreigner. Jesus even points out the separation: only “this foreigner” came back to say thank you. This story is not about etiquette and writing thank you notes. It **is** about the total healing Jesus offers to everyone, about radical love (hospitality?) that knows no bounds.

“Get up,” Jesus says, and the word that Jesus uses means “resurrection,” the same word used when Jesus is raised from the dead. With everything stacked against this man: Hansen’s disease, isolation, shunned from the city, from society, being a shamed, hated Gentile ... Jesus says “you have a whole new life.” Get up and go!

“Your faith has made you well.” “Faith” here is much more than the “I believe” or “we believe” that we recite in the creeds of our tradition. *Faith* is about the way a person lives, and living in such a way, it has been described, not as “I love God,” but “I am *in love* with God.” Such living faith involves giving oneself over in complete trust to God, acting as if God might actually be able to bring people back from the dead. “Get up,” Jesus said, “resurrect.” The man’s trust/faith gave him back his home, his family, his honor, the restoration of his skin – a completely new life journey.

One powerful lesson from this story is that “the most dreaded outcasts” (a quotation from author John Grisham) can teach us about redemption, about being made whole – even new – by Jesus. Resurrection is available to all of during this life by giving up our life and labor to the Lord.

“Giving our life and labor to the Lord” ... those words sound familiar; they are the actions of Eucharist, of Holy Communion. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek word “eufaristo,” and it means thanksgiving. When we come to the Lord’s table and receive bread and wine, we are offering all of ourselves to Jesus; we are gifted with taking in Jesus’ body and blood. We take in the source of new life, of redemption! If resurrection is available to a complete outcast in an ancient world, it might well be available to you and me ... and it is. We have died to our former lives in the waters of baptism, and have been raised to life in Jesus Christ. We are invited to return to the Lord’s table, over and over again, to give up ourselves through falling in love with Jesus. We give thanks. We practice thanks-giving. Get up. Go (into the world). Go.

In the story of Namaan, a nameless slave girl shows him the path to redemption, the path to be made clean and whole. That path is readily available to us, as it was to Namaan. Wash in this nearby river; your faith will make you well. Your practice of being in love with God, with Jesus, redeems our lives, and the path to redemption is not an overgrown, difficult way. The simple path of following Jesus lies right in front of us, with what we have on hand. It is Jesus who performs the mystery and the miracle of new life. Our task is to show up and give thanks.

Psalms 111 tucks itself right into a practice of thanks-giving. This psalm is an acrostic in Hebrew, the beginning and middle word of each phrase is a listing of the alphabet, in order. The piece is a meditation:

Praise the Lord!

Imagine if we began each day with that phrase: Praise the Lord!

And practiced giving thanks, all day, through the alphabet, for God's works in ongoing creation and in redemption....

Namaan's life was made new in the nearby river,
The outcast leper's by showing his thankfulness at the feet of Jesus,
Business person and prisoner Neil White in a prison-turned-sanctuary,
With the "even lesser" of God's people ...

Where will we give thanks,
... at whose feet will we offer ourselves?

Choose life, friends. Over and over again, we offer ourselves, our life and labor, to the Lord.

As we taste of bread and wine, take Jesus' body into our own,
See if we can hear
The shout
Or the whisper:

Get up! In me is your resurrection! Go!

Amen.