

THE JOURNEY AND THE JOURNEY'S END

Since it's Thanksgiving today, there's no mystery as to why we heard that familiar gospel story just now. The point it makes— that we need to follow the example of leper who returns to thank Jesus—is painfully obvious, if not downright hackneyed. It's about how we need to be deliberate in being thankful. And it's undeniably true that when we're children we have to be taught to say "thank you," and learn the importance of writing bread-and-butter notes after a getting a gift or going to a lovely party. Except Jesus didn't heal the ten lepers because he was looking for thanks.

Alas, such a superficial interpretation hardly makes for a compelling sermon, especially on a day like this. There's got to be something else we can make of this familiar text. There's got to be another angle we approach it from, an angle which can help us to appreciate it better.

One angle is Luke's preoccupation with journeying. A large part of his gospel concerns the various encounters Jesus and his disciples had as they made their way to Jerusalem. And even after it all ended badly there, two of the disciples just kept on journeying to Emmaus. Yet even that's not the end of Luke's preoccupation with journeying. He continues the theme in his second volume—*The Acts of the Apostles*—where we read of Jesus' disciples making their way ever outward from Jerusalem to "all the ends of the earth."

But why was Luke preoccupied with the idea of journeying? Maybe it's because he was writing from a Gentile perspective and had clearly made a costly journey—an emotionally and spiritually costly one—to follow and proclaim Jesus. That's certainly part of what we see going on here.

"On the way to Jerusalem," we begin. We're on the journey. "On the way to Jerusalem as [Jesus] entered a village, ten men with leprosy approached him." You'll recall that people with leprosy had to live away from others, yet here they are, having dared to leave their isolation to journey closer to Jesus. Sure, they cried out from a distance, but they had clearly made a costly journey.

That's all well and good—but it's what happens next that's even more unexpected. Jesus says, "Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean." *As they went, they were made clean.* Presumably they went to show themselves

to the priests before their symptoms were gone. Presumably the healing happened while they made their journey.

So I think this is a story about how life is about moving forward. It's about how we need to ask for what we want. It's about seeing the miracles that happen all the time as we journey through life. And it's about how having faith that somewhere along life's journey we'll find the one who can help us, and heal us, and love us. It's about how in finding that one, we also get what we really want, which is to be fully and wholly well. After all, Jesus said, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." He didn't say, "Your faith has saved you," or "Your faith has cancelled your sins." No: your faith has made you well. Faith that what you truly, madly, deeply want is not only there for the asking, but is also available.

Now, one of my cardinal rules is that the sermon as autobiography is to be avoided at all costs. But, since I'm six feet above contradiction, I'm going to break my rule, at least for a moment. Twenty years ago this coming Wednesday, my priestly journey began—a journey which I thought I had all mapped out. I knew what I wanted—at least I thought I did—and I got it. But that grand ecclesiastical preferment, and all of the bling associated with it, made me remote and withdrawn and afraid to show my real self. As the years went by, and the journey became less joyful and more wearisome, I slowly began to perceive that I needed to be healed from the things like shame and secrecy which were isolating me from joyful community.

As most of you know, some months into the pandemic, at a time when all of us were isolated from community for fear of infection, I was asked to come here. God only knows why, but you all had faith in me—and I had faith in you. Some people thought it was a crazy idea, and—who knows?—maybe it was. But, crazy or not, we believed that together we could find courage to journey into God's future.

All of which is to say I'm thankful today for my priestly journey which has brought me to be here among you, a journey in which I too have found what I really wanted—even if I didn't know it was what I wanted—which is the kind of love which I hope allows me not to stand at a distance from the community, but which rather carries me into its very heart.

I only share that, my dear friends, because all of us are wounded and looking for healing. The wounds may vary, but the cure is the same, which is faith. "Your faith has made you well," Jesus said. Faith that the thing we dare to cry out for will somehow one day come unbelievably true. Faith that even though this present journey is often powerfully dismaying, it can also be wondrously miraculous. Faith that somewhere along the journey we'll encounter the surprising grace of love. Faith that it's only love which can heal us and send us into the future with courage.

So, with all that in mind, let me return to my initial idea that we need to look beneath the traditional and obvious interpretation of our appointed gospel text. Remember the conventional hermeneutic which suggests that the one leper who returned to give

thanks did what we should do. Yet Jesus said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” Now, “The priests” aren’t just ordained folks like me, but are all of us who share in the priesthood of all believers. In other words, let the community see you and embrace you and heal you. And Jesus also said “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Giving thanks to God doesn’t consist of going back, of looking back, but going on our way into a future of ever-greater restoration and healing. Giving thanks to God means we can go on our way in the faith that one day we’ll finally come to the great feast of which this Eucharist—this Thanksgiving—is but a foretaste: the Supper of the Lamb which is both the journey and the journey’s end.