

“Of Gratitude and Altitude”
C Pentecost 21, Luke 17:11-19
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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. A STORY OF TEN

It’s a story of ten. Ten folks on the margins. Cast out of the community. For they had some sort of skin disease. It’s not the same condition as when we talk of *modern* day “leprosy”, but it’s something bad enough to render one “unclean” and forced to stay “outside the fold,” away, separated. It’s contagious. It’s visible. It was considered “gross.”

Though, lots of things were considered unclean, so it may have been a condition or variety of conditions that nowadays, with a little 3-D Ointment and good hygiene and long sleeves, we would not consider a big deal at all.

It’s a story of ten “out in the region between Samaria and Galilee.” Now, actually, there was no region *between* Samaria and Galilee. For these two countries, historic and bitter rivals, were—for better or worse—*next-door* neighbors!

The “region *between*” may have been more of a mythical place—that place “out beyond the tracks” where you cast the unwanted, put the garbage; pretended you were “safe” by putting some distance, barricades and borders between you and the undesirables.

But, really, it wasn’t *that* “far out there” because,

12 As he entered a village, ten lepers[b] approached him.

Keeping their distance, (but close enough to shout) **13** they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

14 When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show

yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

II. A STORY OF ONE

It’s a story of one.

15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was *healed*, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. **16** He prostrated himself at Jesus’[c] feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. **17** Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? **18** Was none of them found to return and give praise to God *except* this foreigner?” **19** Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

One of them. The Samaritan. That’s the one who “got it”. Got who Jesus is and what he’s about.

That would be a like an undocumented, dark-skinned person of another faith being the *only* one *among* all of us who really heard and GOT Jesus. Got his purpose; his message of God’s love for all. The Gospel of loving our neighbor and the stranger in our midst and those different from us.

It’s a story of one AND of ten. For not *only* was the one who remembered to give thanks “made clean.” All ten were restored and sent back to the priest for approval to re-enter their hometown.

Jesus didn't divide and conquer. Didn't separate the grateful from the Un, or deem some more valuable and worthy of healing than others.

But he did make it known that it sure was interesting that the "outsider", the stranger, the foreigner was the *only* one who gave the glory to God and "got" who Jesus was and what he was about—loving ALL the neighbors, not just some.

III. GRATITUDE—GOTTA HAVE IT!

It's a story of Gratitude. Of reminding ourselves to **stop!** Even *while* we're running down the road, full-speed ahead into the new path that's suddenly opened before us, and give thanks! Praise! Glory and gratitude to God.

Wow! Lookit that! Even several weeks *before* Thanksgiving, and we're reminding ourselves! (Well, tho, tomorrow is actually Canadian Thanksgiving!) Don't we always bemoan every Thanksgiving that "we should be thankful *more* than ONE day a year. Don't we feel guilty for a few moments that we even have to be reminded, and then get on with the turkey and trimmings?!

On the very surface, this story challenges us to "be the ONE." The one out of ten that remembers to stop, look, listen and give thanks. Not just to traipse on our merry way like those ingrates do *every* time.

Several folks have shared with me recently that they've begun a "Gratitude Practice" and this has become a meaningful part of their spiritual journey. Lie in bed before arising in the morning and think of three things to give thanks for before you even start the day. Or, keep a little notebook with you—by your bed. Or, look into your coffee cup before booting up the computer and name your three or five things.

There's even an "APP for that!" Several in fact! I did a little search on my iPhone and found all sorts of apps—from free to a whopping \$5.99. The free one I chose was pretty cute: Notes to Self, it's called, and has a little red heart icon. There are quotes on gratitude from the likes of Lucille Ball, Tina Fey and Jimmy Fallon. There are categories for you to make daily and weekly notes to yourself: "Things You're Grateful For," "Reflect on Something Good" and "Random Acts of Kindness."

(I'd be happy to show it to you after class!

It's a story of Gratitude. And so much more.

IV. ALTITUDE—EAGLE'S WINGS

Most of all, it's a story of Altitude.

Of lifting up, restoring, renewing. The scripture translation says "Jesus told the man: 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'"

But, actually, it's "Your faith has saved you!"

And saved, if you remember, in the scripture does *not* mean this singular notion we tend to give it, of "knowing where you're going when you die," but rescued, redeemed, restored, reconciled. Returned to community. Renewed to life abundant! In community.

For he is no longer forced to live "in the place between," outside the town, on the other side of the tracks, a pariah, a castoff. But, he has been welcomed back into the circle. Back to wholeness that's so much more than just physical healing.

We sang a few minutes ago of being "raised up on eagle's wings." God lifts us, by the hands and wings of angels and others, to wholeness, out of the trenches—those "never-never lands;" the places between the borders.

“Eagle’s Wings”

And He will raise you up on eagle's wings,
Bear you on the breath of dawn,
Make you to shine like the sun,
And hold you in the palm of His Hand.

And this lifting is done by God, *regardless* of the *size* of our faith! Remember last week, how we talked about “how much faith is enough?”

Rev. Jana Schofield up in Ferndale, Washington, gave an excellent sermon on the same passage—I love it when synchronicity works like that! (You might remember Rod and Sharie Schofield, members here, have a daughter who is a Lutheran pastor.)

She brought to light a *most* important point: it doesn’t matter how MUCH faith we have, because what matters is in whom we have our faith, and that we have it *together!* As we gather. As we are the Body of Christ, walking together, holding one another up-- in prayer and in faith. THEN, the “amount” of faith is multiplied a *hundred* fold: *more* than enough.

When we’re feeling the least “faith-FULL” or like our faith really *is* as tiny as a mustard seed and can’t move mountains no matter how we try (or throw mulberry trees into the sea!) that’s when we most need one another. Most need to come together, reach out a hand, a hug, an encouraging word—to bolster one another in our *collective* faith, hope and love.

V. WHERE ARE THE WINGS?

So, where, on this day, as we walk with Jesus toward the village, do *we* need some altitude? Where do we need to be restored? Welcomed back? Brought in to the fold?

Where do we need to *offer* forgiveness and reconciliation—to *be one another’s* eagle’s wings, the “Lifters”?

Who lifts you up, whose “assist” does God use to “raise *you* up on Eagle’s wings; bear you on the breath of dawn, and make you to shine like the sun?”

When have you been lifted up and given strength and hope again, by an angel—usually looking very human—that God has commanded to be sent to you?

How are we the uplifting wings for one another?

VI. AMISH FORGIVENESS STORY

Recently the story was told on NPR’s Story Corp of a community where pretty profound lifting, saving and restoring to life and wholeness took place. It began with forgiveness—that step of faith which makes whole, both the forgiver and the forgiven.

Hear this story from the Amish community (NPR) It has been a decade since Charles Roberts IV took 10 young Amish girls hostage inside the West Nickel Mines School one-room schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, before killing five, wounding the others, and committing suicide. Immediately following the tragedy, the Amish community reacted in a way that many found surprising—with forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an important tenet of the Amish faith, which closely follows Jesus’ teachings to forgive one another and place the needs of others before your own. Vengeance and retribution are left to God.

Their quickness to forgive the killer led a number of Amish to attend the funeral of Charles Roberts, and closeness developed between his family and the community—particular his mother, Terri Roberts.

Terri sat down for StoryCorps to remember the events of October 2, 2006, how the Amish community treated her following the killings, and to discuss her current relationship

with one of the severely wounded girls.

Terri Roberts (TR) and Delores Hayford (DH)

TR: As I turned on the radio on the way there, the newscaster was reporting that there had been a shooting at the local Amish school house.

By that time I was at my son's home, and I saw my husband and the state trooper standing right in front of me as I pulled in. And I looked at my husband, he said, "It was Charlie."

That week, we had a very private funeral for our son. But as we went to the gravesite, we saw 30-40 Amish start coming out from the around the side of the graveyard, and they surrounded us like a crescent. And love just emanated from them.

I will never forget the devastation caused by my son.

I mean, especially in the situation with Rosanna. Rosanna's the most injured of the survivors. Her injuries were to her

head. She is now 15, still tube fed and in a wheelchair. And she does have seizures, and when it gets to be this time of year, as we get closer to the anniversary date, she seizes more. And it's certainly not the life that this little girl should have lived.

So I asked if it would be possible that I might come and help with Rosanna once a week. So I read to her, I bathe her, dry her hair...

DH: Does Rosanna know who you are, Terri?

TR: I believe Rosanna does know who I am. I can't say that for a hundred percent certainty. I just sense that she does know.

One of the fathers the other night, he said, "None of us would have *ever* chosen this. But the relationships that we have built through it ... you can't put a price on that.

And their choice to allow life to move forward, was quite a healing balm for us. And I think it's a message the world needs.

They saved this woman. This community, by extending their wings, restored her to life; to wholeness, by their forgiveness. Her life was lost. How would she go on? Living under the evil

shadow of grief and guilt that her son had caused such tragedy? Her life was over, essentially. The snare of the fowler had caught her, one fateful day, and life as she'd known it was over. She was an outcast. A leper. Just as countless parents and family members of killers are in our society. Dylan Klebold's parents. Eric Harris' family (some of whom I know personally), Jeffrey Dahmer's mother, the list goes on.....

When that Amish community reached out to her, they not *only* forgave her and went on. They *continued* to reach out, *continued* to lift her in prayer and love and gave her a place in their community. This is nothing short of miraculous! Yet, it is what Jesus does for the lepers. And, it is what we have the opportunity to do, time and again.

We have a chance to be the “lifters on Eagle's wings” in countless times and situations. We might not realize how many chances present themselves to us—even in day-to-day life and situations.

“And God will raise you up on eagle's wings;” God will *use* us— as the lifted and the lifters—to bear one another on the breath of dawn; bear one another's burdens. And hold us, each one, in the palm of God's hand as we hold one *another* in gratitude and altitude. Thanks be to God!! Amen.