

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“WHY CHURCH? A PLACE OF HEALING”
LUKE 17:11-19
October 10, 2010
9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Lepers were powerless to heal themselves. Still, Jesus could not heal them without their cooperation. Their faith was necessary, and complete healing or wholeness only came with gratitude.

While we can only imagine the gratitude of the ten lepers, the truth is we have as much reason to be grateful as they had. God has touched all our lives for good, in whatever ways that goodness has been given. We grew up singing a song, “**Count your blessings**”. God has blessed us in ways far beyond our ability to number.

Gratitude seems to be in short supply today. The faster, more frantic pace of our lives seems to leave little time for social graces and pleasantries. On the other hand, it only takes a moment to say “**thank you.**” A decline in gratitude would be the most ominous of signs. Without gratitude the heart grows cold and the soul dies.

The chief of all symbols and metaphors is the heart, technically only a muscle, but a muscle we cannot live without. What does the heart represent? How much time do we have? The heart may symbolize the whole personality; the heart may represent the emotions, as distinguished from the intellect; the heart may symbolize generosity, compassion, goodwill, romance, love, courage, ardor, and the essence of the self. As with the muscle in our chests, however, something the heart symbolizes may need healing as well.

Heart disease, always an enemy of health and longevity, has many causes. Today we are more aware than ever that life style choices are among these causes. The physical heart must be cared for and protected. This fact only enhances the heart’s usefulness as a symbol and metaphor. The physical heart may be as

vulnerable as the heart of poetry, music, and romance; and sometimes heart problems in one area cause heart problems in the other area. The two kinds of hearts are not in every way similar, however. A physically enlarged heart is a serious medical problem, whereas we praise largeness of heart in the social and relational realm. The Grinch who stole Christmas is described as having a heart two sizes too small!

Think of the ways we describe negative experiences such as sadness, rejection, grief, and conflict. We speak of broken hearts, heavy hearts, divided hearts, and lonely hearts. When someone has had an overwhelming experience of defeat or depression, we may sense that the person has **“lost heart.”** When you are so overcome with emotion that you cannot speak, you may feel that your heart is in your throat. There are many conditions, around us and within us, that call for some kind of healing. Jesus found this to be true everywhere he went; and, of all the countless ways he transformed people’s lives, he cared most about healing the human heart. Why Church? Because hearts can be healed here!

In the world of the first century, leprosy was one of the worst plights that could befall a person. While it was a highly contagious and deadly skin condition, it was not what we know as leprosy today, which is also known as Hansen’s disease. In Jesus’ time people afflicted with leprosy were completely isolated from the world of other people, except for other lepers. On his way from Galilee to Jerusalem Jesus encountered a band of ten lepers. They kept their distance, as required, but they cried out, **“Jesus, Rabbi, have mercy on us!”** Jesus’ response was to say, **“Go and show yourselves to the priests.”** If lepers claimed to have been cured, they were required by law to be examined by a priest, who alone would determine whether they were ready to be reintegrated into society.

Jesus’ instruction was a call to faith. These lepers were to go to their priests in the confidence that prior to their arrival they would be healed. Each obeyed, and each was healed. Only one of the ten, however, thought to return to Jesus and give thanks. It is significant that the one who alone returned was not a Jew but a Samaritan, which to a Jew meant a **“foreigner,”** one who was unacceptable. Jesus asked three obviously rhetorical questions. **“Weren’t ten healed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”** Then Jesus said to the Samaritan, **“Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”** Why Church? Because the church is a place of healing.

It is understandable if some of us question whether Jesus used the right word. He said, **“Your faith has made you whole.”** Didn’t he mean, **“Your gratitude**

made you whole”? Surely Jesus said what he meant! Perhaps our own understanding of faith is not broad enough. Faith is more than belief. Faith recognizes that God’s gifts are precisely that - - gifts. They are not rewards; they are not something God somehow owes us. They are free expressions of God’s love. The most appropriate response to a gift is gratitude. God’s grace generates not only faith, but gratitude.

One of the miracles of human life is that there is always reason for gratitude. Even when we are downtrodden or at wit’s end, it takes but a moment for us to think of something for which we are grateful. The giving of thanks comes from the dim dawning of the human story, and is universal to all ages and all faiths. The earliest lesson many of us learned, and the most natural, was the importance of saying, **“Thank you.”** It would not be difficult to find a consensus among all those who work in what are called the **“helping”** and **“healing”** professions that the most healing of all emotions is gratitude. All manner of therapeutic programs and spiritual disciplines rely on the transforming power of gratitude to move people toward health and wholeness. In the eighteenth century William Law was saying that the **“shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection”** is to learn to **“thank and praise God for everything that happens to you.”** Gratitude, he insisted, can turn any apparent calamity into a blessing.

No book has more or more varied references to the heart than the Bible. In Genesis, God is grieved **“to his heart”** over human wickedness. **(6:6)** In Exodus, Pharaoh’s heart is hardened. **(7:3)** In Deuteronomy is the promise that God will be found **“if you search after him with all your heart.”** **(4:29)** The blessing of God will be with all who have **“clean hands and a pure heart,”** says the psalmist. **(24:4)** **“Create in me a clean heart,”** is the psalmist’s prayer, **(51:10)** and there is such submissiveness in the psalmist to ask that God will **“search me, and know my heart!”** **(139:23)** Jesus said, **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”** **(Mt 5:8)** And he said, **“Let not your hearts be troubled.”** **(Jn 14:1)** St. Paul urges the Colossians to **“let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.”** **(3:15)** The scriptures are perfectly clear that what God wants is our hearts. And having our hearts, God has all of us.

The opposite of gratitude is often cynicism. The cynic believes that expressions of gratitude are merely secret hopes for greater favors. If we are nice to people, they will be nice to us. Real gratitude, however, has nothing to do with taking advantage of people’s kindness or using people. True gratitude is a spontaneous reaction of the heart to something good, something we have not earned and may not deserve.

**Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish,
Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.
Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish;
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.**

If you are in need of healing this morning, you're in the right place. Come Grow Your Spirit With Us. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.