



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Turning Back

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 9, 2022

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

One Wednesday morning a few years ago, I attended the Eucharist and free breakfast offered to all at St. Mary's Cathedral. During the breakfast, I sat next to a man named Reggie. After we introduced ourselves and shared small talk about sports, the weather, and the food that morning, we each told a little of our stories.

I assumed that Reggie was an unsheltered neighbor in need of a warm breakfast and a little help that day. He surprised me by telling me that he was employed as a journeyman electrician, owned a home, and has a family. Reggie went on to tell me that he used to live on the streets, and the Wednesday service and breakfast at St. Mary's were the times he found the most nourishment and hope during some very hard times. They were pivotal in helping him turn toward a better life. Reggie said, "I come back every Wednesday I can to give some encouragement to the men and women who are in the hard place I was in a few years ago. It's my little way of saying thank you."

In today's Gospel passage from Luke, Jesus healed ten persons with leprosy, what we now call Hansen's disease. Notice how he healed them. He did not lay hands on them, for they were all kind enough to stand far apart from him, practicing a first-century form of social distancing. Instead, Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priests.

So, they turned around and began walking. They were healed not by standing still, but as they were in motion. I think Jesus was showing them and us that healing is not a noun.

It's a verb.

It's a process.

It's something that happens as we 'live and move and have our being,' as our prayer for guidance puts it. Nine of those who were healed kept going. Presumably, they went to show their priests what happened to them, as Jesus asked. And then they went on to new and different lives, in which they felt physical, mental, and emotional relief, and in which they no longer had to live in isolation. For the first time in their lives, new possibilities were open to them. And they probably wanted to avoid anything that reminded them of the hard, painful, debilitating times they had lived before they were healed.

But one of those healed, a despised Samaritan, did something very different. He turned back. As he walked, or more likely ran, back toward Jesus, he shouted out praises to God. When he at last

made it to Jesus, he did not simply bow or kneel, he prostrated himself – he laid his whole body and being – as an offering at the feet of Jesus. And he thanked him. In doing so, he reoriented his whole life toward Jesus.

I would imagine that Reggie, the electrician I met at the St. Mary's breakfast, was tempted to avoid anything that reminded him of the hard, painful, humiliating days of his former time on the streets. Rather than going back to the service and breakfast, he could easily have gotten closure by writing a thank you note to the volunteers. He could have expressed his heartfelt gratitude to them and let them know about his job, his home, and his family. The volunteers would have passed that note around and posted it on the bulletin board. They would have been overjoyed by the transitions in his life, and have been pleased that the Eucharist and breakfast had been positive turning points in his story.

But Reggie wanted to be a *living* thank you note. He wanted to come back week after week to live out his gratitude by continuing to serve and receive alongside the community. He wanted *to turn back*. He wanted his gratitude not to be a noun nor a one-time event. He wanted it to be a very active verb and an ongoing journey. Just as his transformation happened as a process over time, his gratitude would also be a process in motion, giving the joy he felt *forward* week after week by helping others. It took a lot of courage and intentionality for both the Samaritan and for Reggie to turn back, to return to the places where they had felt hurt and pain, but where they had begun to feel healing. The natural thing to do would have been to keep going and to never look back. But something inside of each of them had to turn back, and had to do so in a lasting way.

One of our longtime Lenten Preaching Series speakers, Diana Butler-Bass, writes, "Gratitude is not only an emotion; it is something we do.

It is like tending a garden.

It takes planting and watering and weeding.

It takes time and attention.

It takes learning.

It takes routine.

But, eventually, the ground yields, shoots come forth, and thanksgiving blooms."

For Reggie, gratitude became a habit practiced each Wednesday morning. We are left to wonder what habit or habits the Samaritan came to adopt after he thanked Jesus. But we are given a clue to the rest of his story by what Jesus said to him as the man laid at his feet, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." Other translations say, 'your faith has made you whole,' or 'your faith has saved you.' Jesus is telling the Samaritan that just as his profound gratitude is a verb, the faith at the man's core is also a verb, and the fruits of that faith - wellness, wholeness, and salvation - are verbs as well. None of them are one-time events, but processes to be lived out and shared in the lives of others. The most important part of what Jesus said to him was, "Get up and go." He propels the grateful Samaritan
back into motion,
back into going on his way offering praises to God,
back into contributing to the healing of others,
back into a joyful life of continuous thanksgiving.

Reggie taught me that Wednesday morning how to *live* gratitude by being intentional and having the courage to turn back. *Amen.*