

10 October, 2010; Proper 23C
Jer 29: 1, 4-7; Ps 66:1-12
2 Tim 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

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Because my last parish had several thousand members, we always had people who were suffering: cancer patients, accident victims, people with relatives in prison, parents wrestling with difficult children. The local intensive care wards were familiar terrain for our clergy, who used to visit daily, each of us taking one day per week, sitting for hours with people struggling to breathe, people who were trying to make difficult decisions, people who were saying their good-byes, even people weeping with astonished joy.

One of these extended vigils took place around an elderly woman who had gone to the hospital for a routine surgery, but who had to stay for weeks and weeks as her body slowly failed. Her family and the parish surrounded her with prayer and with constant visits. And when it was over, her children did a surprising thing. They brought to the nurses and doctors who had tended her a huge supper of meat and bread and fruit and cheese, serving it to the night shift with their own hands. It was not that their mother had lived; she had not. But her children were so grateful for the care which she had received that they wanted to show their gratitude, not just with a card, but with something that would require them to go out of their own way for the people who had done so much for them. It made me think: so many of our parishioners had received the same attentive and gentle care, and yet, this was the first time I had seen a family give back. They reached beyond the institutional framework of the hospital to see the people who had blessed their lives.

Jesus encounters such a gesture in today's Gospel reading. The story is simple enough. Jesus encounters ten lepers while he's going toward Jerusalem. They approach him, while politely keeping a safe distance away, begging him to have mercy on them. Rather surprisingly, Jesus does not reach out and heal them. Instead, he tells them to show themselves to the priests, which was what the Mosaic Law said that a leper should do if he were healed. And on their way, they became clean, so one of them turned back and thanked him. Presumably, the other nine continued on their way to the priests, as Jesus had instructed them and as the law commanded, for only the priests could certify that a leper had been healed and allow him to be restored to human community. The nine, in other words, continued on a predetermined and sanctified path that would give the glory to God. But the one man noticed that, in this case, God had used a human agent: Jesus. And so the Samaritan leper had taken time to acknowledge him as well. In the words of St. Paul, he had been careful to "remember Jesus Christ." (2 Tim 2:8)

What does it mean to remember Jesus? Most often, we speak of memory as an action of the mind or heart: recalling another person, being reminded of a special time or place, bearing someone or something in mind. In this sense, remembering Christ might be cultivating an awareness that we live always in Christ's presence. God is not far off, hovering on a cloud or sitting on some distant mountaintop. God is here, among us, now, today, wherever our lives take us. One of the collects in the daily office appeals to God "in whom we live and move and have our being," and so part of remembering Christ is waking up to reality. It might be sharing your life with Christ as you would share it with a good friend, not trying to hide the things that make you afraid or perplexed or ashamed, but opening your heart to Christ in the hope of advice, guidance, or comfort. St. Paul urges us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17); what can that mean other than remembering Jesus wherever we are?

But the story of the leper suggests that remembering Jesus might also mean acknowledging the human agents through whom God works in our lives. Teachers who inspire us to keep trying, even when a subject is difficult; doctors and nurses who go to extraordinary lengths to heal us; musicians whose work opens our heart; a spouse or child who cleans our house -- each of these

brings us wholeness of being. You might say, "But they were only doing their job!" -- and that is true. But does that mean we should not notice?

In last week's Gospel, which immediately precedes this one, Jesus told a parable about a servant who labors all day in the fields, and then, when he comes in, the owner of the house (with whom we are asked to identify) asks him to make and serve dinner, too. The point of the parable is not, as I wish it were, that we should be less exploitative in our labor relations. Rather, Jesus asks us to compare ourselves to the slave and, when we have done everything we were commanded to do, to say, "We are worthless slaves. We have done only what we ought to have done!" (Luke 17:9) I have to admit that that word, "worthless," sticks in my craw. Is it really of no value to do everything we ought to do? I would argue that to perform our work well and thoroughly is the beginning of integrity: it manifests our determination to live in this world as people who give the best that we are to one another. It manifests our desire to live in this world as people who bring Christ to one another.

The ancient Greeks spoke of *arete*, which meant "offering all actions as a sort of sacrament to excellence, ...devoting one's life to finding excellence, ... identifying it when it offers itself, ... and achieving it in your own life."¹ That's as good a definition as any of remembering Christ: devoting our lives to finding him, recognizing him when we see him, and offering all that we do as a sacrament. Dom Gregory Dix, the great liturgical scholar, identified four actions in the Eucharist: take (the bread and wine), bless them, break them, and give them to one another. Sacramental living manifests these same actions in our everyday lives. We take what we are and the circumstances we have been given, offer them to Christ for blessing, break them open so that we can see them truly and frame a just response (even if that means breaking our habits, our self-will, or even our selves), and share them with one another so that each might have enough.

When we live like this, we are re-remembering Christ, putting Christ back together again, joining the pieces of Christ that are scattered in ourselves, in our neighbors, and in the world around us and offering them for Christ's service. Christians often speak of this kind of remembering as *anamnesis*, a kind of remembering that makes the story come alive again. When I was a child, I used to play Chronicles of Narnia, imagining that my closet was the wardrobe, and my very ordinary clothing was the fur coats, reaching back into the darkness until I reached the snowy land populated with fauns and magical creatures. Soon, the ordinary world would fade away and my friends and I would be in a new and higher world. We do it liturgically during the Eucharist, when we invoke the words of Christ -- "This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you." -- and suddenly Christ is among us once more, offering himself to us for strength, for healing, for pardon. We do it, sometimes, in our works of mercy, as when my friend Melinda knelt to help cut the toenails of a man for whom she was delivering Meals on Wheels, and suddenly there was light everywhere. But we do it daily when we welcome those in our lives and look for Christ within them, knowing that Christ is already there.

The poet Adrienne Rich ends one of her poems,

*If you can read and understand this poem
send something back: a burning strand of hair
a still-warm, still-liquid drop of blood
a shell
thickened from being battered year on year
send something back.*²

¹ Dan Simmons, *Ilium*, p. 594.

² Adrienne Rich, "Coast to Coast," *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*.

She is speaking of responding wholeheartedly, of sending back our selves, flesh and blood and burning fire, of endurance, of surviving year after year and still being able to offer our endurance as gift. Nobody said that living the Gospel would be any easier than that.

When St. Paul speaks of "enduring everything for the sake of the Gospel," that is what he means: sending his life back to God, a costly offering of right action and right speech, moment by moment, trial by trial, until it becomes all Christ. Only then does he become a living word of God, visible to all.

St. Paul reminds us, in the words of an ancient hymn,

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

if we endure, we will also reign with him;

if we deny him, he will also deny us;

if we are faithless, he remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself. (2 Tim 2:11-13)

In the end, that is our choice. Not whether we allow Christ to be in our lives, in the people we encounter, in the strangers we never meet, but whether we acknowledge Christ to be there, turn aside to meet him, and stop to give thanks. We cannot erase Christ's presence from the world. We can only live in ways that obscure it or reveal it.

At the end of today's parable, nine lepers pick up the pieces of their own lives, but one returns and puts on the life of Christ. If we imagine where they go from here, we see two different trajectories. The nine probably go to the priests, perform the cleansing ritual, and return to their families, going to synagogue on Sunday, making the appointed sacrifices, and living good and upright lives. But the one, the Samaritan, is harder to predict. Having seen Christ once, his eyes have been opened. He might start to notice things other people do not see, to speak with people others ignore. He might draw upon the pain of his own life as a leper to help other people who are cast out, rejected, or treated as unclean. He might begin to follow Jesus around, might even have been one of the people on whom the fires fell at Pentecost. (We don't know!) Jesus tells him, "Go on your way; your faith has made you well," but, if we see clearly, there is no "my way" which is distinct from Jesus' way. There is only the path of daily gratitude, the path which makes us whole. On that path, we no longer look for the Kingdom of God, seeking here and seeking there. On that path, we know that it is among us already, waiting for us to remember where we are.