

21 Pentecost, Proper 23, Yr. C
October 9, 2016
2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-17; Luke 17:11-19

After some weeks of indecision, I finally decided to do a class in this winter's Clearing program. And, again, after some wrestling, I decided to call it "Coming to Wisdom" – although I'm aware that I could be accused of hubris with that title. What I want to do is distinguish between information, knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Wisdom, I think, comes only after lots of experience and lots of reflection on that experience. Our psalm today says that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That word "fear" is better translated as AWE – so understanding who God is and who I am in relation to God and who everyone else is in light of that same relationship. All of that goes into wisdom. But there's more to it and here there's a tie to our readings, which point out a couple of additional things that go into the coming to wisdom: the first one is finding out what really matters, so we can get our priorities straight and the second, most central to these readings, is developing a grateful heart. Wisdom is about how we understand the world. I saw a cartoon this past week. There's a partially filled glass of water sitting there, and three guys are looking at it. The first one thinks: it's half full. The second thinks: it's half empty. The third thinks: what's that glass doing there without a coaster?

So let's take these questions about gratitude and wisdom and look at the first reading and the gospel. Leprosy is common to both readings. As you undoubtedly know, to have leprosy in the ancient world was really to be condemned to a living death. You were seen as contaminated and unclean, a person to be avoided. You were cast out of the community, made to leave home and family, living alone or with a community of other lepers. One presumes that Naaman was protected from some of this because he "was a great man and was in high favor with his master..." He was a victorious commander. The request for his cure went from King to King. And he arrives in Israel, at the home of the prophet Elisha, with his military entourage – the text says his horses and chariots. Part of the text, which we didn't read, also says that he brought money – lots of it – and, for some reason, 10 changes of clothing. But when he arrives, he's met, not only without the fanfare he's accustomed to, but by an underling, not even the prophet himself! The underling just brings a message: go and wash in the Jordan. It's all too much! Naaman's attitude is perfectly captured in those words: I THOUGHT THAT FOR ME HE WOULD SURELY COME OUT AND STAND AND CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD HIS GOD AND WOULD WAVE HIS HAND OVER THE SPOT AND CURE THE LEPROSY! And maybe the key words in that phrase are the words FOR ME. He's used to respect, to deference. When he doesn't get it, he throws a bit of a tantrum but his servants convince him to give it a try. He does and he's cured. But, again in a part of the text that's not included, Naaman is like the 10th leper. He is grateful. He offers riches to show his gratitude, but they're declined. And then he asks a favor – could he take two mule loads of dirt back to his own country so that he'll remember what has happened and so that he will be able to worship this God on holy ground? He's grateful; he knows he's been blessed.

And then there's the story in Luke. You could read this on the simplest level as an exhortation to always write thank you notes. But you'll notice that the other nine, the ones that didn't say thanks, didn't have their cures reversed because of their failure. I think one of the key words in

this passage is the word SAW. The first thing that happens is that Jesus SAW the lepers. He really saw them; he understood what they were suffering, he must have seen their isolation and their despair. But to see in the way that Jesus did means to do something about what you're seeing. (Which, of course, is why we're often tempted to put ourselves in positions where we won't have to see.) Jesus' response is short, sweet and to the point: Go and show yourselves to the priests, he tells them. Because you'll remember that Leviticus stipulated that only the priests could pronounce the person free from the disease and able to re-enter society. They don't question, they just go and, the text says, that as they went, they were made clean. And then the next sentence, with that word SAW again..."one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back..." He SAW, certainly on the physical level, but also he understood what had happened, what a gift he had received, who was responsible for that gift and what his response should be: thanks and praise.

It's worth noting, too, how this "thank you" functioned. It didn't cure the leprosy; that was already done. And as I said, there's no indication that the cure was reversed for the others. No – all ten received the gift of physical healing. But the Samaritan received something more. He was the only one who heard those final words: YOUR FAITH HAS MADE YOU WELL, sometimes translated as "your faith has SAVED you." Or, even better, your faith has made you WHOLE. Or perhaps even better than that, for the point I'm trying to make – your faith has brought you wisdom. Because he SAW, he understood what was going on, he's not only physically healed, he's spiritually awake, too. He has a whole new way of seeing the world; he now knows that EVERYTHING is a gift. He sees, not a world full of problems and threats, but a world full of blessing and goodness.

Both Naaman and the lepers have been given their lives back to them. But I'm thinking that most, if not all of us, have had a similar experience. A life-threatening condition cured, a heart attack averted, a narrowly missed accident. Whenever I think about this, I'm reminded of my British son-in-law, Jon. He was in Indonesia doing research work. He was on one of the outer islands and noticed that his visa was about to expire. To get it renewed, he had to fly to Jakarta and the planes only left on Tuesday and Thursday. He wanted the Thursday plane because the Tuesday one would be too late and apparently Indonesian officials weren't very sympathetic with expired visas. So he called for a reservation and was told that the plane was full. He tried everything: explaining, cajoling, intimidating. All to no avail. I deeply suspect he even tried the old, DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM ploy. Didn't work. So he went to the office in person and tried it all again. NOPE. Went again and tried a bribe; didn't work. So he finally resigned himself to going on the Tuesday plan and taking the chance that he wouldn't be stopped in the meantime. He made it to Tuesday and took the flight without incident. As they were approaching to land, his seat mate turned and asked him, "So, did you hear what happened to the Thursday plane?" It turned out that it had crashed on landing and all aboard were killed. When he told me that story I simply said, "You've been given your life back; now how are you going to live it?"

The answer, of course, for all of us, is to live wisely, at least one part of which is the recognition of how much we've received – everything actually, starting with the creation. Cosmologists often point out how many things had to happen in just a certain way for us to be here at all. Bill Bryson, in his book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, puts it like this: "to attain any kind of

life at all in this universe appears to be quite an achievement. As humans we enjoy not only the privilege of existence but also the singular ability to appreciate it.” And doesn’t gratitude naturally follow that appreciation?

Here are some words from Helen Keller, who certainly is an example of a person whose life was lived in gratitude. Once, when she and a friend were walking in the woods and the friend said that she didn’t notice anything exceptional in the walk, Keller said,

“I wondered how it was possible, to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing of note. I, who cannot see, find hundreds of things: the delicate symmetry of a leaf, the smooth skin of a silver birch, the rough, shaggy bark of a pine. I who am blind can give one hint to those who see: use your eyes as if tomorrow you will have been stricken blind. Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow. Touch each object as if tomorrow your tactile sense would fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never taste or smell again. Make the most of every sense. Glory in all the facts and pleasures and beauty which the world reveals to you.”

And that’s just the natural world. What if we spent the same energy becoming aware of each and every blessing of each and every day. At the very least, we’d have bigger, more generous, more loving, more joyful hearts – moving along the path to wisdom. Amen.