

FAITH AND GRATITUDE

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There's a little town in Palestine in the northern West Bank of Israel between Samira and Jerusalem called Burqin. In Luke's Gospel there is a discrepancy about the region between Samaria and Galilee. Actually, these places border each other. Was Luke fuzzy on his geography or was he speaking theologically? Does this encounter happen in a space that's set apart as far as Luke is concerned? Regardless, Burqin doesn't make the top list of sights to visit when you're on the "I ran where Jesus walked" tour. I've been to Israel twice now and I will always make sure I visit this town. The town itself is nothing special really. They are attempting to register with the UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The roads of Burqin are hilly and narrow therefore not friendly to large tour busses. I was first fascinated with it because the name is so like my maiden name of Bourquin. I've even seen it spelled similarly.

This town is purported to be the place of the miracle of Jesus healing the ten lepers that we just heard this morning. When visiting, if you choose to, you can get off the tour bus and walk up a fairly substantial hill to St. George's church, built on the site of a cistern or cave with a hole in the roof. Actually, the church, considered to be the 3rd oldest in the world, is built into this cistern where legend has it these 10 lepers were residing having been shunned by their community. It's a remarkable little chapel really. As I stood in this church on my first visit, I had one of those moments that happen in Israel where you have this overwhelming experience of standing in a place that the real human Jesus has stood. It took my breath away. It's also the place where I met and fell in love with this Byzantine icon of Christ Pantocrater of Sinai. The original of which lives in St. Catherine's monastery on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt.

So back to our story... these 10 unfortunates perhaps suffered from what is now called Hansen's disease. This malady, known among humans for thousands of years, went untreated in biblical times. It causes permanent damage to skin, nerves, limbs, eyes; compromises the immune system; and hastens death. Though it is now known to be only mildly infectious, the ancients considered it highly contagious and forced lepers to stay away from others, identifying their condition by announcing, "Unclean. Unclean," when approached.

As a result of their infection, they were treated as outcasts bound to one another by their disease. But as Jesus is walking through the village, out of sheer desperation they call out to him. And astonishingly Jesus goes to them. What happens next is fantastical, he doesn't make them confess their faith or question them about their worthiness. Instead, he merely tells them to go and show themselves to the priest who is the only one who could release them from their isolation. And as the ten leave to seek the priest, one of them notices that he is healed. In that moment he turns and instead of continuing with the others to the priest he turns back to thank Jesus. To fall at his feet and worship him. This is when we hear Jesus remark that all ten were healed, why is only one grateful? A good question! But to the one who came to him he says, "Go, your faith has made you well."

So, this morning I am focusing on faith and gratitude. What does it mean to be faithful? What does it mean to be grateful? There are many other stories in the Gospels where Jesus says go, your faith has made you well. What does it mean to have that kind of faith? And how do I get that faith? I want that!! In this story, the gratitude comes before the proclamation of faithfulness. The tenth leper (let's call him Leo) upon noticing his healing, came back to Jesus to show his deep gratitude. It's

only after falling at Jesus feet did Jesus remark about Leo's faith. Jesus doesn't take the credit; he says it's all about Leo!

I have a friend who upon getting sober started a gratitude journal. Almost a decade later, still sober and still beginning every day with a list of things he is grateful for, this friend has truly got a remarkable collection of thoughts to look back on. Think about it, to begin your day not moaning about the aches and pains of our aging bodies or the third day of rain, but listing the things in life to be grateful for is a remarkable process. To live with that kind of gratitude must put you in a place of profound faith. Because where does all this wonder come from? We can't make it all happen.

Think of the amount of people who, when something tragic happens to them, rail against God saying, "Why would God let this or that happen to me?" Of course, my response is that God doesn't make these things happen, being human does. And I always point out that Jesus himself wept at the death of his dear friend Lazarus.

Is the opposite true? When things are ticking along great, how often do people say to God, "Hey God today is a fabulous day, thank you"? Yes, some of you may do that more than most but it's like muscle memory, we need to do it more and more so that it strengthens our faith muscle.

Perhaps I'll start a gratitude journal and begin my day like my friend. Will that increase my faith? I think so. If I spend even a few minutes a day being grateful for even the small things, I believe that I will, in time, see that the remarkable amount of good in the world is thanks to God and that will increase my faith! Hey, it's worth a try!

My prayer for all of us this week is that we would open our eyes, look around, and see at least two things for which we are grateful.

Amen.