Sunday, October 15, 1989
THE LEAST EXPECTED
Luke 17:11-19

From time to time, we ministers are asked to officiate at funeral services for individuals who, when they die, have no church relationship and thus no pastor. So the funeral director will call and ask me or Jann or Jane to do the funeral. Usually, the funeral director, in conversation with the family of the deceased, has sought to determine what preference the family has as to their brand of religion. Then the funeral director knows whether to call a United Church of Christ minister, or Methodist, or Baptist, or some other kind.

A few years ago, I was asked to do a service of this kind, and after accepting, I was told by the funeral director and the family that the man who died was not religious and, in fact, did not particularly care for priests or ministers. Then I wondered if the reason I was asked to do the service was because I seemed to be the most unlike a minister of anyone the family or funeral director knew.

A little over a year ago, an attorney who is a member of this church called and asked if I would do a funeral service for a woman who had been a client of his. She had no immediate family members, had been single all of her life, and this attorney was therefore responsible for taking care of all of the funeral arrangements.

He told me that she had not been a particularly religious person throughout her life. I asked him if that meant that she had not been a member of an established religious institution such as the church, and he said that was the case. He could find no religious affiliation in her background.

I asked what kind of vocation she had followed in her life, and he told me that she had been a social worker all of her working life, and indeed a very dedicated one. She had spent almost all of her time working among the disadvantaged and had truly given her life on behalf of others. She had carried on her work in a loving and caring way. It was more than just a job. In a very real way, she had worked at feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and visiting those who were sick and in prison.

All in all, she had lived a very fruitful life and had carried the love of God to countless people in very practical and helpful ways. It was an easy funeral service to do. I had learned a lot about her even though I had never known her.

The point is, there are times when we can find the love of God working through the least expected people — those whom we did not think of as being religious in the usual understanding of that term.

Jesus knew about this in theory and in practice. Remember the story he told about the Good Samaritan? He told this story to an audience made up of people who sincerely believed that they, and they only, were the chosen of God, and that Samaritans could do no good; that God had banished them to hell. Yet in the story, as Jesus told it, the people we would’ve expected to be the most religious, namely the priest and Levite, passed by the man who was injured and in the ditch and in need of help, and it was the irreligious Samaritan who practiced the love of God to neighbor. He was the least expected.

The story read this morning from the Gospel of Luke carries the same theme. Jesus was met by ten lepers as he entered a village, and they wanted his help. It is hard for us today to imagine the scene, but it is important to try in order to enter into the spirit of the incident.

Lepers in Jesus' day, and for long afterward, were believed to be highly contagious, were called unclean, and were required to live beyond regular human communities, depending upon charity for their sustenance while their disease, untreated, ravaged their bodies and disfigured their faces. Today, it would be like ten people with AIDS who were far along in their illness.

The small crowd of lepers that met Jesus that day would've been ragged, deformed, undernourished, and not pretty to look at. Everyone else in the scene would've been horrified. In their extremity, they called out to Jesus for healing.

It's revealing in the Gospels to note how often those who lay claim to Jesus' power are in extremity: ill, cast out, rejected, lonely, misunderstood, powerless. Many people today who reach out to Jesus do so for the same reasons.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus had mercy on them and told them to show themselves to the priests, and as they went to do that, they were healed.

According to the religious rules of that day, the priests were empowered to decide who was a leper and who was not, and they, therefore, had the power to determine whether a leper who claimed to be healed was, in fact, now free of the disease and could return to normal society.

Now the story takes an unusual turn. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks." And here's the punchline: "Now he was a Samaritan."

Frequently, this story from Luke's Gospel is used as a text for Thanksgiving sermons — the preacher goes on to talk about the ungrateful nine who did not return to give thanks.

But the main point that Luke wants to make is that the individual least expected to be praising God and giving thanks is the one who did so.

He was the least expected because he was a Samaritan, and Samaritans were supposed to be of the wrong religion, which to many people is worse than having no religion. In Jesus' time, and before, the Samaritans were considered to be heretics. They were thought to be outside of God's love and care and outside of God's Kingdom. They were supposed to be unacceptable in God's sight, according to those who were sure they knew all about God.

The least expected. Here is the truth that hurts. It is so often the stranger, the visitor, the outsider, the outcast, the least expected who sees, hears, enjoys, and responds in gratitude for the countless gifts that are ours every day, but for which familiarity has made us unable to appreciate.

The visitor in the home plays with the children, which the parents had hardly noticed between coming home and reading the evening paper or watching the news on television. The visitor gives thanks to the one who has prepared the meal, which others of us have eaten a thousand times in silence. The visitor's presence prompts us to say grace at the table, a practice never consciously stopped, just unconsciously neglected. The visitor is shown places in our community, which we ourselves are truly seeing for the first time.

And isn't it ironic that the one who returned to give thanks, the one who though cleansed of his disease, was still an outcast in Jesus' world — a foreigner, a heretic, a traitor to the ancestral faith?

As long as the ten were united in their misery, it apparently made no difference who was a Jew and who was a Samaritan; they lived together as lepers. Now that they were all healed, the old distinctions emerged again. Luke implies in his telling of the story that the other nine were Jews, and after they were all healed, would have nothing to do with that Samaritan, or any other Samaritans for that matter. While they were in their misery, they would eat together without any thought, but now that they were healed, the nine would not have allowed themselves to sit at the same table with the healed Samaritan. But there's the unusual twist that the one who is still the outcast, the least expected, is the one who returns to give thanks.

Isn't it strange that in misery or in illness or in tragedy, we human beings can live and work together without making the usual artificial distinctions? In misery, tragedy, or persecution, we are united; we are aware of our connectedness. But when we come into prosperity, then we begin to make distinctions, then we begin to separate ourselves from others.

According to the Gospel story, Jesus wondered aloud about the others. "Where are they?" And in his wondering, Jesus raises the nagging questions of human ingratitude. It's easy for us to look at the nine healed lepers with a sense of outrage. These nine had been healed of the worst disease they could possibly have. Why do they celebrate their good fortune and forget that Jesus made it all possible? Maybe they thought they deserved to be healed, and we're not usually grateful for getting what we think we deserved in the first place.

Are we much different? Think of the things we take for granted. Think of the things we are sure we deserve because of who we are.

Note too, that these ungrateful nine stay healed. Insensitive and ungrateful though they may be, what has been given to them is not taken away. Nor is what we have received taken from us. God's love and care for us is not dependent upon our gratefulness or ungratefulness. The Bible makes it clear that God makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust. Neither thankfulness nor ingratitude alter the way God deals with us. However, whether or not we are thankful does change us inwardly. Prayer doesn't change God. It changes us. Thankful people are giving people who are fun to be with and who reach out to others. Ungrateful people are stingy and greedy and don't care much for others.

So this is more than a story about healing and more than a story about being thankful or not thankful. It is, above all, a story about the unconditional love of God. The love of God has nothing to do with how lovable we are; the existence of God is gracious to the creation that God loved into being, even when that creation pays no attention.

The people at home reading the newspaper this morning or who stayed in bed and never even thought of coming to church and offering thanks will pass the day in as much safety as we will. Isn't that upsetting?

Wouldn't it make us feel better if we knew that being here would bring us some reward, that those at home with a newspaper or rake or a few extra hours' sleep miss out on? We know we aren't supposed to feel that way, but we do, don't we?

Yet God goes on showering grace on the world regardless, sustaining those who cannot or will not believe, and those who will not worship or give thanks.

But there is nevertheless a difference. When Jesus said to the Samaritan leper, “Your faith has made you well,” he meant that a deeper healing had taken place in that individual. The one leper who returned to give thanks was not only healed of his leprosy, but also knew how he had been healed and where his healing had come from. And so he felt more than the self-centered elation of the other nine. He felt gratitude. He felt that sense of happiness and wholeness that overflows into thankfulness.

Isn’t that the lesson for faith in this story? It’s not that people of faith are any better than other people, or that people of faith deserve or receive special treatment from God. It’s that people of faith understand how the world really works, understand what the source of all goodness and wholeness and hope truly is. And that makes all the difference. And it’s often the least expected that remind us of this truth.

In his book, On the Road with Charles Kuralt, Mr. Kuralt tells of being present for a Thanksgiving dinner in Mississippi, among the least expected.

A long road took nine children out of the cotton fields, out of poverty, out of Mississippi. And on that Thanksgiving weekend, they all returned. One after another, from every corner of this country, with much cheering and much hugging, the nine children of Alex and Mary Chandler were coming home for their parents’ 50th wedding anniversary, as well as for Thanksgiving.

All nine children had memories of a sharecropper’s cabin and little to wear and almost nothing to eat. All nine were college graduates, and many have graduate degrees.

The father, Alex Chandler, remembers the time when he had a horse and a cow and tried to buy a mule and couldn’t make the payments and lost the mule, the horse, and the cow. And about that time, Cleveland, the first son, decided he wanted to go to college.

They didn’t have any money, so they went to town; the son wanted to catch the bus to go on from there to college. So they borrowed two dollars and a half from a niece and bought him a bus ticket. And when he got to college, that’s all that he had.

From that beginning, he became Dr. Cleveland Chandler, and is now Chairman of the Economics Department at Howard University.

As time went on, they all left and went to college. Luther left for the University of Omaha and went on to become the Public Service Employment Manager for Kansas City. He helped his younger brother, James, come to Omaha University too, and go on to graduate work at Yale. And in his turn, James helped Herm, who graduated from Morgan State and is a Technical Manager in Dallas. Fortson, another son who is a Baptist Minister, went to Morehouse College. One sister, Bessie, went to Tuskegee, another named Gloria, to the University of Missouri, another sister, Princess, to the University of Indiana.

And so, helping themselves and one another, they all went away, and now 50 years after life began for the Chandler family in a one-room shack in a cotton field, they were all together again.

Alex Chandler, the father, prayed the Thanksgiving prayer at the table. “Our Father in heaven, we come at this moment, giving thee thanks, for thou hast been so good and so kind. We want to thank thee, O God, for this, for your love, and for your Son. Thank you that you have provided for us all through these years,” and Mr. Chandler began to cry.

Remembering all those years of sharecropping and going hungry and working for a white man for fifty cents a day and worrying about his children’s future, remembering all that, Alex Chandler almost didn’t get through this blessing. And neither did the others.

The least expected. Thanks be to God. Amen.