Sunday, November 20, 1994
THANKSGIVING FROM THE LEAST EXPECTED
Deuteronomy 8:17-19; Luke 17:11-19

From time to time, those of us who are ministers are asked to officiate at funeral services for individuals who, when they die, have no church relationship and thus no pastor. The funeral director will call and ask one of the ministers on our staff to conduct the funeral service.

Usually, the funeral director, in conversation with the family of the deceased, has sought to determine what preference the family has in their brand of religion. Then they know whether to call a United Methodist minister, a Baptist, a United Church of Christ minister, or another denomination.

A few years ago, I was asked to conduct a funeral service of this nature. 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 they knew.

Then, about a year later, an attorney who is a member of this church called and asked if I would conduct a funeral service for a woman who had been a client of his. She had no immediate family members, had been single all her life, and this attorney was therefore responsible for taking care of all her affairs.

He said to me that she had not been a particularly religious person throughout her life. I asked if that meant that she had not been a member of a religious institution like a church. He said this was indeed the case. I asked what she had done as her life's work. It turned out that she had been a social worker and a very good one. Indeed, she had spent most of her time working among the disadvantaged, giving her life on behalf of others. In addition, she had carried on her work in a loving and caring way. In a real sense, she had worked at feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and visiting those who were sick and in prison — all those things Jesus said we should be doing.

All in all, she had lived a fruitful life and had practiced the love of God to her neighbor. It was an easy funeral service to conduct. I learned a lot about her, even though I had never known her.

The point is that there are times when we can find the love of God working through the least expected people — people we do not think of as being religious.

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.

Yet in the story as Jesus told it, the people we would've expected to be the most religious — namely, the priest and the Levite — passed by the man who was in the ditch and in need of help, and it was the irreligious Samaritan who practiced the love of God toward his neighbor.

The story read this morning from the Gospel of Luke carries a similar message. Jesus was met by ten lepers as he entered a village, and they wanted his help.

Lepers in Jesus' day were society's outcasts. Leprosy was believed to be highly contagious, and lepers were required to live beyond regular human settlements, depending on charity for their sustenance while their disease, untreated, ravaged their bodies and disfigured their faces.

Today, in some parts of our country and our world, people with AIDS are outcasts in a similar way. I was reading the other day that Jimmy Allen, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, who has lost a daughter-in-law and a grandson to AIDS, and who has another grandson who is HIV positive, said that his grandson could not get into a Southern Baptist Sunday School anywhere. The father of these two children is naturally quite alienated from the Christianity in which he was brought up. Allen also has a gay son with AIDS. Allen has struggled and has come up with a biblical reference that was quoted in the newsletter of Evangelicals Concerned: "The first man in history to reach out and voluntarily touch lepers didn't die of leprosy. He died at the hands of religious leaders who wouldn't have touched a leper on a bet."

That small group of ten lepers who met Jesus that day would've been ragged, deformed, and undernourished. Everyone else around them would have been horrified. In their extremity, they called out to Jesus for healing.

It's revealing to note how often in the gospel stories 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, 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 clean 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. Now he was a Samaritan."

Frequently, this story from Luke's gospel is used as a text for sermons on thanksgiving, as I am doing today. But the main point that Luke wants to make is that the individual least expected to be praising and thanking God is the one who did so.

He was the least expected because he was a Samaritan, and Samaritans were supposed to have the wrong kind of religion. In Jesus' time and before, they were considered heretics. They were thought to be outside God's love. They were supposed to be unacceptable in God's sight. This was the opinion of those who were sure they knew all about God.

Here is the truth that should get our attention: 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 to which familiarity has made us deaf and blind.

The visitor in the home plays with the children 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 that 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, only unconsciously neglected. The visitor is shown places in the community that we ourselves are truly seeing for the first time.

Isn't it ironic that the one who returned to give thanks, the one who praised God, 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?

Notice too, that 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 healed, the old distinctions emerged again.

The other nine would probably have nothing to do with that Samaritan or any other Samaritan for that matter ever again. However, there's the unusual twist that the one who is the outcast, the least expected, is the one who returns to give thanks.

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

According to the Bible story, Jesus wonders aloud about the others. Where are they? And in his wondering, Jesus raises the nagging question of human ingratitude. It's easy for us to look at the nine healed lepers with a sense of outrage. These people had been healed of the worst disease they could have. How could they celebrate their good fortune and forget to be thankful to the God who made it all possible? Perhaps they thought they deserved to be healed, and we're not usually grateful for getting what we think we deserved in the first place.

Note that these ungrateful nine stay healed. Insensitive and ungrateful though they may be, what has been given them is not taken away. Nor is what we have received taken from us when we are ungrateful. Whether we are grateful or ungrateful does not alter the way God deals with life. God, in other words, is not small-minded or small-hearted. According to the Bible, God makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the just and the unjust.

This is more than a story about healing and more than a story about being thankful or not being thankful. It is above all a story about the unconditional love of God. The love of God toward us has nothing to do with how lovable or unlovable we are. The existence of God is gracious to the creation that God continually loves into being, even when that creation pays no attention. The people at home reading the newspaper this morning 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 a bit upsetting?

Wouldn't it make us feel better if we knew that being here would bring us some reward that those at home with newspaper or rake or a few extra hours of sleep are missing 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 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 also taken place. The one leper who returned 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 that overflows into thankfulness.

Isn't that the lesson for faith in this story? It's not that the 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 is. And that makes all the difference in the world in your life and mine. And it's often the least expected who remind us of this truth.

One of my favorite Thanksgiving stories comes from Charles Kuralt's book, On the Road with Charles Kuralt. He describes being present with a family for a Thanksgiving celebration in Mississippi among the least expected.

This was a family with nine children, and on that Thanksgiving weekend, they all returned home to celebrate their parents' 59th wedding anniversary along with Thanksgiving.

All nine children had memories of a sharecropper's cabin, little to wear, and little to eat. All nine are 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 but couldn't make the payments and lost the mule, the horse, and the cow. And about that time, Cleveland, the first son, 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 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 what was then the University of Omaha, now part of the University of Nebraska. He 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 school at Yale. In his turn, James helped Herman, 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, 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 back 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 you, 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 begins to cry.

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

The least expected. Thanks be to God. Amen.