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October 14, 2007

Ruth 1:8-19

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

Not to rub it in any more, but I am sure some of you remember that two weeks ago the Episcopal clergy of Michigan were invited to a conference on Mackinac Island at the Grand Hotel. This was the fourth gathering of the clergy at the hotel, every other year for the past six. In some ways, we knew what to expect when we reached the island. And, I have to say, for the money we spent at the hotel, even with a huge discount gave us the right to some expectations. The food at the hotel was every bit as delicious as before. The service as exquisite. The setting as elegant. Everything about the island met our expectations. The discussions with the Presiding Bishop, the times of prayers, and the closing liturgy filled many of us with a sense of confidence and hope for the life of the Episcopal Church. We were fortunate to have had much time to leisurely walk through the shops on the Island without the crowds that descend in July and August. We were fortunate to have been able to rent bikes and ride around the Island in the peak of its fall colors. Even a year in which the splendors of autumn is a bit muted, the beauty was majestic. I am grateful for the opportunity Linda and I had to be on the Island.

But what I treasured most from our time on the Island, besides being with Linda, was not the meals, or the hotel, or the presiding bishop. What I treasured most was the opportunity I had on Wednesday afternoon to run around the Island. This is something that I began to think of way back in February and March when I was puttzing around in the wheel chair. This is something I dreamed of doing as I sat in St. Mary's Hospital back in April with my blood clots. I barely dared to hope, and had no right to expect that come October I would have been able to be able to run around the Island. Friends, I did it. Much more slowly than before. And, definitely in more pain than in years past. But, I did it. And when I sat in the tub after I finished, I was almost in tears. I had skipped the famous Grand Hotel Luncheon Buffet to have time for the run. But, the ice water, grapes and the crackers I devoured after the run was the most delicious meal of the week. Running has never been as joyful as it has been since I broke my leg.

Do you ever wonder what it must be like for someone who has been blind to see a sunrise? Do you ever wonder what it must be like to hear the voice of someone you love, after years of silence? Do you even wonder what it must be like to feel joy after months of depression? Do you ever wonder how delicious food must taste after you have starved? Do you ever wonder how exhilarating it is to laugh, after months of grief?

Think of all you experienced this past week, or just yesterday. The coffee, the apple pie. The voices of loved ones. The things you have seen, heard, touched or smelled. Think of friends you were with. Think of the games you watched or played. Think of the laughter shared. Think of driving your car, walking your pet, reading a book, hugging your children, embracing your beloved. How rich your life is because of each of these moments? Can you imagine these being taken away from you? Can you imagine how grateful you would be to have them back?

In the Gospel this weekend, Jesus cures ten lepers. Can you imagine the gratitude they felt in being cleansed? Not only were cured of a horrific disease. They were also cured of their isolation. After they were cleansed they could be welcomed back to their community, back to their family. After they were cleansed, they could return to the people they loved. In healing them, Jesus gave them back their life. There is no reason to doubt that all ten were grateful for the healing Jesus had granted them.

But, one man returned to Jesus, threw himself prostrate on the ground at his feet and thanked him. What made him different? Why did he return, and not the others? It seems that the difference is somehow related to the fact that he was a Samaritan, he was a foreigner. Maybe the nine who were Jews expected Jesus to heal them. Jesus was a well known healer. He was a Jew like them, he was one of them, a fellow countryman. They, like him were of God's chosen people. The Samaritan, had no right to any such expectation. He was despised by the Jews, hated, unclean, unworthy. He shared nothing with Jesus, he had no right to assume that Jesus would heal him. Yet, like the nine countrymen of Jesus, he too was made clean. He had no right to presume he would be healed. Yet he was. All were grateful, but the Samaritan was overwhelmed with gratitude. His gratitude, made him not only clean but well. His gratitude brought him salvation, fullness of life.

Sometimes I fear that we who have so much assume that God owes us. We--or I--have a sense of entitlement. Like the Grand Hotel, sometimes I come to God with my expectations. I almost presume that God owes me the food I eat, the air I breathe, the home I live in, the people who love me. I presume God owes me the right to go where I want to go, do what I want to do, buy what I want to buy. I have so much, and I take so much for granted. Sometimes, too often in fact, I forget to say thank you to God. Sometimes I fear that we who have been given so much assume that God even owes us forgiveness. I am not so bad. We are nice people. Never mind the state of our world. Never mind the violence in our cities, the weapons manufactured in our land, the wars waged in our name, the destruction caused by my standard of living. Never mind my waste, my neglect, my indifference. God will forgive us. Too often I mumble my way through the confession of sin, and too often I am so presumptuous, that I assume God owes me forgiveness. Too often, I barely utter my thanks.

The Samaritan throws himself at the feet of Jesus. How can we do the same? Did you notice that one of the ten returns? Perhaps, in this one in ten we have a clue. The Episcopal Church affirms the tithe as a standard of giving. Tithing means one tenth. Often we assume that tithing is about enriching the church. But it really is not about raising funds for the church. Tithing is about showing gratitude. Tithing is a way to make ourselves well. Perhaps we could move toward tithing. Move toward giving to God one tenth of what we have received as a way of giving thanks. Imagine if we gave to God one tenth of our day. One hour in ten of prayer, study, service to God's people. If I am awake 15 hours say.....give an hour and a half to study, to prayer, to visiting a lonely neighbor, to making a phone call, knitting a shawl, to writing congress, to making a meal, to serving as a tutor. When I buy groceries, buy one bag in ten and give it to a food pantry. To tithe my riches, and give one dollar out of ten to the spreading of God's kingdom.

I do not doubt the gratitude of all the lepers healed by Jesus. The nine did their duty after they were cleaned of their leprosy. But, it seems that perhaps they were not cured of their expectations, their sense of entitlement. They expected Jesus to heal them, and he did.

- May we imitate the Samaritan, the foreigner, the one who was not entitled, the one who had no right to expect healing.
- May we show our gratitude, not only by what we say but by what we do.
- May we show our gratitude and thank Jesus by placing our lives at his feet, in service to his world.
- May we imitate the faith of the foreigner and like the Samaritan, may our faith filled gratitude make us well.