

MADE WHOLE

JEREMIAH 29:1, 4-7; LUKE 17:11-19

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We've all had the experience of losing something important – a wallet or car keys for example. Do you remember how you felt when you found them again? Like shouting for joy. Right?

I found Carol's keys to the car not long ago. They were missing for about two weeks. She kept saying, "I know they are here somewhere." Losing the keys also meant that the little remote opener to which the keys were attached was lost.

A small item worth about \$100 bucks the last time I checked.

Then last week I was fishing around under the driver's seat of *my car* for some reason and my hand struck a set of keys. When I pulled them to the light I saw that they were Carol's keys. Don't ask how they got under the driver's seat of my car. A trial attorney like John Horn could have a field day with a question like that. The point is we found the keys and when I gave them to Carol her face lit up. You feel like you are made whole again when you find something important that has been lost.

I want to talk today about this powerful story from Luke of the ten lepers Jesus heals and also continue our ongoing conversation this stewardship season of giving and faith.

How do you think those lepers felt when Jesus healed them? If you feel like part of you is missing when you lose your car keys, how much more when you lose your health? And, in Jesus' time, as if the disease wasn't enough, leprosy meant being excluded from the community. Not only had you lost your health but your friends and loved ones, too. Every day living on the margins, at the outskirts of town, on the edges of society with your leprous skin you were reminded of your half missing life.

I don't think, by the way, that we have totally gotten away from this.

There are several taboo diseases that even in the 21st century carry the social stigma that leprosy did in the first century. There are very few socially acceptable diseases out there.

So here we have ten lepers who very probably felt less than human, incomplete. But if Luke's story is about human incompleteness it is also about human wholeness.

I want to call to your attention the Greek word used in this story in verse nineteen for "made well." "Get up," Jesus says, "and go on your way for your faith has made you well." The word is "sozo." It can be translated "to make whole" or "to save." Both meanings apply, as we shall see.

What prompted Jesus to make this observation? What signaled to Jesus that the Samaritan's faith made him well? It was the fact that the Samaritan came back to thank Jesus for healing him. In other words the Samaritan believed that it was Jesus and not the priests or happenstance or his "deserving it" that made him well. It was Jesus and he wanted to thank Jesus for doing it.

I would also argue conversely that the nine who did not return did not receive the benefit of “sozo.” That is they might have been cured of their leprosy but they were not made well or whole, nor were they saved.

Here is an important distinction that unlocks the message of today’s story: giving thanks is not synonymous with faith. But faith and giving thanks are inseparable. Gratitude is a sign that our faith is alive and well. Gratitude is a sign that we know where our blessings come from.

I say those nine did not have faith. If they had faith they would have made the connection between their healing and Jesus. Their gratitude would have impelled them to return to Jesus. When your life has been handed back to you and you know who is handing it back you don’t ignore the giver of the gift.

Gratitude is inseparable from faith. It is the most basic indication to yourself and to the world that you cannot do it or go it alone. That you are not completely self-sufficient, that you might actually need someone else’s help or love or support – otherwise why bother to give thanks?

So when that lone leper came back to thank Jesus for healing him he was saying, in effect, I am able to see beyond my now healed body to the One who healed it. Without God, without Jesus I would not be healed. The message from Luke today is that it is precisely the trust that the leper’s health and healing come from God that makes him whole. His wholeness isn’t anything Jesus “does” to him, it is the result of his believing, his faith.

Your faith has made you “sozo” whole, well, complete, put together again says Jesus. The message is until we experience and express our gratitude to God for the gift of life we remain incomplete.

Luke throws a spotlight on the life-transforming affect of gratitude. This is powerful stuff. Here is a paradox. I know some people, I am sure you do too, who are physically broken but spiritually whole. A woman I visit often on Thursdays is living with cancer. But she is thankful to God for her life and you can see her wholeness sparkle in her eyes.

But there are also some people who are physically well but spiritually incomplete, even broken. Folks who haven’t yet made the connection between their blessings and God. They may attribute fate or luck or hard work but they do not attribute their blessings to God. I do not condemn these people. In fact, sometimes I find myself among them.

Perhaps it is human nature that when things are going well we just tend to take things for granted or take more of the credit than we deserve. A little bit of this is expected. But there are lots of ways a church community can bring us back, remind us Who is the Source and Sustainer of life.

Habitually failing to make the connection between my life and God is spiritually fatal. This was the case in Israel in the time of Jesus. Later in the Book of Acts, which Luke also wrote, he talks about the blindness of Israel to God’s grace but a growing receptivity among the Gentiles.

Why? Israel's special place in God's plan for the world turned in upon itself. Frequent favors had settled into blinding familiarity. Life's blessings taken for granted.

The reasons for this are many but they do not justify our pointing the finger. Rather we see this in every generation. Is it not often the stranger in church who sings heartily the hymns we have long left to the choir? Who expresses gratitude for blessings we had not noticed? Who listens attentively to the sermon we think we have already heard? Who gets excited about our old Bible and who becomes actively involved in acts of service to which we send small donations?

It is an interesting fact that over the past several years new members to Westminster typically begin their annual pledging at higher levels than the average member pledge. As Reed Stevens says, "the new members get it."

Each of us is born with a sense of self-gratification, self-protection, and self-centeredness important for our survival but as we mature these instincts can deter our development.

If we stay stuck in ourselves and on ourselves we will never feel the need to thank any one for anything let alone God; neither will we discover the joy of God's grace or of human fellowship. Absent gratitude we will live isolated and alone.

But if we cultivate faith that connects what we have and who we are to God, if we realize each day is a gift as the poem a church member gave me says, "I wake with joy, I am alive; this is my day, I know it! With every thought and every word and every deed I show it! God guides my steps, my world is bright, my heart sings 'til I say good night." If that poem works for you even the rough days cannot take away God's grace.

It seems to me that the *way we give* reflects the *way we live*. We give either out of obligation, guilt, or *gratitude*. It makes all the difference which one it is.

This past week I had lunch with one of our venerable members. He has served Westminster and our community in many capacities. He is one of the most generous people I know. He would not think of himself as especially generous.

He asked what I was preaching about this Sunday. I told him the story of the ten lepers and the one who came back to give thanks. I said the message for me was that our lives are not complete until we thank God for all the blessings we have. The act of gratitude makes us whole, I said. He stared into the distance, chuckled and said "You're talking to me."

I don't think we can ever thank God too much for all that we have. Even the exiles in Jeremiah's time gave thanks to God. But the statistics in today's story suggest that only one in ten of us get there. Do you think if more people knew that just by thanking God their lives would be richer, more full, more complete that they would do it?

The way I see it we're all lepers at the roadside and Jesus comes by everyday, some of us haven't even called out to him yet, some of us have and have been healed, and some of us, the lucky ones, healed, have gone back to thank him.

Which is it for you? Do you need to ask for healing? Do you need to go back and fall on your face at his feet? Do you need to tell others how they too can be made whole? The beauty of it is God invites us to move forward wherever we are. It's the difference between life and death. Amen.