

Merciful Gratitude

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship

May 16, 2021 – 7th Sunday of Eastertide

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Luke 17:11-19

As I was mapping out this sermon series at the end of Lent this seemed like a logical Sunday to talk about one of Jesus' healing miracles. Obviously, I had no clue at that point of the dramatic change in CDC guidance for dealing with the Covid pandemic would be issued in the days leading up to this Sunday. These kinds of serendipitous coincidences are how I know God has a sense of humor! Yet what better Sunday could there be to talk about one of Jesus' healing miracles, this first Sunday after the surprising announcement from the CDC on the easing of many Covid restrictions. This announcement was greeted with all sorts of reactions, ranging from unmitigated joy to genuine confusion and even anger. Who could have imagined that this longed for easing of Covid pandemic restrictions would bring with it so much anguish and confusion? Who would have thought that this relaxing of mask wearing and restrictions on gathering together for those who are fully vaccinated would be treated with anything but unbounded joy? Honestly, I have not encountered joy so much as I have confusion, anger and even fear. Was the Covid outbreak really that serious if it could have been turned around so quickly? And what about those people who are refusing to get vaccinated? And what if the vaccines don't work that long? And what if, what if, what if.

I'm certainly no expert on any of this. That's why I have been so very grateful for the work of our church's Pandemic Response Team whose job it has been to keep on top of ever shifting guidance from state governments and the CDC. We happened to be meeting this past Thursday, just after the dramatic change in guidance on mask wearing came down from the CDC late that afternoon. We spent our time discussing all this in detail, helpful because there were so many of us looking at the guidance and each seeing different nuances. Bethany in particular noticed that in spite of all the notations regarding the easing of masking requirements and restrictions on groups of vaccinated people gathering, there was little if any change to the recommendation for churches other than allowing for a return to 100% capacity as long as social distancing requirements could be met. In fact, CT still recommends that the safest play for

churches is still to offer virtual services only, without folks gathering together in the churches. HUH????? How helpful is that? NOT!

I don't know about you, but I guess I had a different image in my head about what it would be like when restrictions would finally be eased. First and foremost, I thought it would still be months away as there is still such a huge push for people to get vaccinated which implied, I assumed, that not enough people had been vaccinated. But yesterday I discovered that, here in New England at least, the statistics indicate that all of the New England states do have a 70% or higher vaccination rate which we have been told is the benchmark for reaching herd immunity. Okay, but how did we get from not enough vaccines in January and February to basically what feels like an "all clear" in May. That just does not seem possible. I mean, wasn't it just a month ago that people were scrambling to get vaccination appointments? What happened? And what about the schools? And eating in restaurants? And those one-way signs on the aisles in the grocery stores? Are we done with that too? Who decides? And are those decision makers making their decisions on what's good for people or what's good for business? Who can we trust here? How can we be sure what will be safe when? It's just all so confusing and I think we just hadn't expected our exit from the pandemic to be as confusing as our entrance into it. But it is. Perhaps even more so because now we know what we didn't know as all this began just one short year ago. Now we know how deadly this disease has been and still can be. Now we know that simple actions can have deadly consequences in terms of infection spread. Now we know that more people died from this disease in this country than in all the wars our country has fought. Now we know just how vulnerable we truly are to disease despite all of the medical miracles so much a part of our 21st century life. Now we know what we didn't know before Covid exploded last year, and that was and remains terrifying.

So, now what? This has always been the question facing us as the reality of needing an exit strategy for the pandemic has been a part of the whole experience from the beginning. We just hadn't thought we'd need one so quickly. When you think about it, though, there's a peculiar kind of logic to the pandemic shifting course so rapidly because that's how it started in the first place. Why would it be any different as we enter this next phase of the pandemic, life after vaccination? After all the disease is still lurking and it's not going anywhere. Yes, we know how to slow down the spread and even prevent it with vaccination. We even know how to treat it, at least in its acute phase. But the Novel Covid-19 disease has not

gone anywhere. As my friend and colleague, Rev. Mal Davis from Pleasant Street Baptist Church reminded those of us in the local clergy association during an intense email chat on this very topic yesterday, “novel” means this is a brand new virus that we know very little about. We know more than we did, for sure, but not nearly as much as there is to know. That’s why we need to keep reminding ourselves that this new guidance on masking and gathering does not mean the end of the pandemic. It just means we are entering a new phase. That’s the part I think we weren’t expecting. I think we assumed the end would be an actual ending as in no problems at all anymore ever. Dear ones, that was never to be, something we are just now coming to understand and appreciate more fully.

So, perhaps, where we are at this moment in our Covid 19 journey is a time to put our energy into being grateful for having made it through the worst and for all the knowledge that the medical community and we ourselves have gained because of this whole experience. In other words, instead of being confused or wary or angry or whatever, we need to put our energies into cultivating an attitude of gratitude for this new phase of our pandemic existence. The importance of being grateful for this most recent turn of events is the whole point of the story we read today from the Gospel of Luke about the healing of the ten lepers. This is unique among Jesus’ healing miracles because of its focus on the gratitude of those healed. In other healing stories, like the healing of the blind man or the bleeding woman or the man possessed by demons and so on and so on, the focus of the story is on the miracle the healing itself represents. In other words, the healing miracle is the whole point of the story. A life is changed – redeemed – by the actions of Jesus. In this story, though, the healing is almost incidental to the discussion about gratitude for the healing Jesus has with the one man who returned to him to thank him for healing him.

A couple of interesting points to consider here. When Jesus first encountered the ten lepers, they called out to him for help. He instructed them to go show themselves to the priests, a key step in being released from the impure status leprosy automatically imposed upon faithful Jews. As they went to do just that, they were healed or “made clean” as the text calls it. One man who realized he had been made clean made the decision to go back to Jesus to thank him for this miraculous act. The man “praised God in a loud voice” and “prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet” in order to thank him. Jesus then asked where the other nine were. I don’t think he was expecting an answer from the man. He just was taking note of the man’s gratefulness and wondering aloud why they all weren’t

equally grateful. He also notes that the grateful man was a Samaritan whom he later calls a foreigner. These references are understood as a reference to the man's difference from the other nine. In other words, the healed man who came back was not like the others in more ways than just his gratitude, a fact Jesus is emphasizing here.

When I read this text, though, I come away with as many questions as I see answers. For one, why did Jesus get upset with the nine who simply were doing what he told them to do to complete their healing – go to the priests at the temple? I also wonder if he would even have thought about their lack of gratitude if the one man, the Samaritan, had not returned to thank him and praise God for the miracle. Perhaps this one man's action of turning back in order to express his gratefulness to Jesus opened Jesus' eyes to see the lack of awareness in the other nine. Perhaps this Samaritan taught Jesus that gratitude for mercy given and received was an important thing for anyone to do, a simple truth that had not even occurred to Jesus in all the healing miracles he had performed up to this point. The gratitude expressed by this man who was one of "those people" allowed Jesus to understand more deeply the impact of his mercy on the people whose lives he touched. Perhaps one of the miracles happening here is that Jesus himself learned that gratitude for God's grace, God's mercy, matters a lot because it reminds the one giving and the one receiving that all gifts ultimately come from God's own self. Thanking Jesus is how the man acknowledged this great gift he knew he had received. The other nine? They were following Jesus' directions, too intent on fully claiming the new life this gift of healing made possible. Part of me thinks they might have stopped to thank Jesus if they'd thought about it. But they weren't thinking about anything but putting leprosy behind them and who can blame them for that. Certainly not us.

We can't blame them because we are them. We are the nine who didn't come back to thank Jesus. How can I say this? Because of the conversation we started with this morning. The long awaited Coronavirus restrictions are at last being eased because the vaccinations have been successful. Infection rates are down. Death rates are plummeting. Life is becoming less scary by the day. But have we stopped to thank Jesus for this incredible miracle? That's what it is, a miracle. Do you remember when this was all starting last year and they were talking about it taking years – YEARS – for a vaccine to be developed, tested and brought into broad enough use to impact the spread of virus? We got there in months. Yes, it's because virologists around the world – in the private sector, in

universities and the pharmacology industry – all pooled their talents and expertise and worked together. That right there is a miracle. Companies that weren't successful in developing their own vaccines agreed to let their production facilities be used to produce the successful vaccines in large quantities. That's another miracle! And let's not forget the people willing to be on the front lines as human test subjects, willing to get experimental vaccines when NO ONE knew the dangers. That's another miracle! And then once successful vaccines were identified, strategies were developed to get vaccines into more arms faster than it had ever happened before. We tend to think about how difficult it was to get appointments initially and not about how amazing it was to be getting them at all.

Dear ones this entire vaccine miracle that has started us down the road of reclaiming our lives is absolutely incredible and amazing. We have been crying out to God for months for mercy, for deliverance, for courage and wisdom to do what we needed to do, and here we are, coming out the other end of the Covid tunnel. Oh, we've still got a long way to go, but the end is in sight. And as we journey these last miles and months, let's put into practice the merciful gratitude Jesus learned at the hands of one man who could not believe he had been healed of an awful disease that had upended his entire life. He knew his healing would not be complete until he thanked God for giving him a second chance at life. May we have the wisdom to do the same, no matter how confused we are about how fast we got here. After all, miracles wouldn't be miracles if they made sense, would they? Amen.