

Sermon October 9, 2016 How do I thank you? Cara B. Hochhalter

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7 and Luke 17:11-19

Perhaps I should have titled this sermon, "Stepping Out"....stepping out in trust, in action and with gratitude! I went zip-lining once...at Zoar Outdoor with some of our youth from the church. Donned with helmets, ropes and carabiners; we climbed up ladders to platforms high in the trees...it was breathtaking and beautiful, I imagine especially so this time of year! A delightful guide led us to the edge of the platform...you know you cannot fall because you have a cable that is hooked from your belt to a hefty cable above...you, and only you, are the one who has to step off the platform; no one is going to push you...but then comes the ride of your life! Beautiful trees whiz by on all sides with vistas of forested mountains coming ever closer.

It takes some guts...to step out in trust, in action and with gratitude!

Let us be in prayer: God who encourages and challenges, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Jeremiah encouraged those Israelites who had been exiled to Babylon; sent away from their homes and familiar surroundings, he told them to step out in faith anyway, to have families and plant gardens...and *even* to pray for those who held them captive so that in *their* welfare, they also would be better off! In other words, make the best of the situation and all will benefit!

Now to this story in Luke of the Ten Lepers. On the bulletin is a picture of the chapel at the very site where supposedly the ten lepers encountered Jesus...it is filled with icons of the story. They come to Jesus who tells them simply to step out...go on their way to the priest to get the certificate with the stamp of health on it! Jesus doesn't touch them or pray over them...but just tells them to ACT as though they were already healed! They must step out in faith and trust this man who held God in his being....

Imagine as they walked...they looked at each other and saw that they were indeed, healed! Most of them hurried along anxious to get that certificate that allowed them back in society...but one...a Samaritan...the one who was despised by the Jews around Jesus listening to this story....the one considered "an outsider," he is the one who returns to give thanks.

Why did the writer of this story make the Samaritan the one who thanked Jesus? Why was the 'bad guy,' the "good guy?" It is like hearing that some brave person

who risked everything to save people from the tragedy of 9/11... was Muslim. Jesus knew we need to be jolted from our prejudices.

I read a story the other day about two men, a Palestinian Arab who lives in East Jerusalem, a Muslim, and a Jewish Israeli who lives in Tel Aviv. Together, they decided to try an experiment...each one went to the other's neighborhood where they knew there would be suspicion and even dislike for them...a possible enemy in the wrong neighborhood.....But they each held a sign that said something like, "*I am Arab/Jew but I believe in peace and I love you. If you agree, please give me a hug.*" They each stood with their arms out wide and waited...they had someone film what happened... in *both* Jewish and Muslim neighborhoods, people moved in, some cautiously, but then they gave hugs and in those acts, they crossed boundaries that spanned years of conflict and mistrust.

It was the despised Samaritan who gave thanks to Jesus....and we rejoice because we really do not want our stereotypes and prejudices to be true.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "*Ten behaved like good lepers, good Jews; only one, a double loser [being both a leper and a Samaritan], behaved like a man in love.*" She says it is one thing to be obedient, for all of us to do what we are supposed to do, obeying the rules and traditions of our church and religion... it is easy to be obedient, *but not so easy to be in love.*

I have just started taking a course...online! It is with a Franciscan priest, Father Richard Rohr, whom I have quoted at times and who has a daily devotional that anyone could get online. The course is called, "Beyond the Birdbath." It is focused on the teachings of St. Francis, whom as you know, was a Christian mystic living in Assisi, Italy from 1182 to 1226. His statue is in many people's gardens surrounded by birds and animals; maybe you have one...

Rohr writes that Franciscan mysticism is a universal notion of all things being one and since October 4th is the day celebrated for the Feast of St. Francis...Father Rohr encourages us *to push the way we see things to the absolute edge-- by including those who are seen as "the other"----the leper, the non-Christian, the Muslim, the poor, the hated.*

He warns us not to lose this "edginess" and that "only love is big enough to hold this truth." Only love is big enough to hold this bold truth of stepping out in trust, acting for justice, and holding deep gratitude. How beautiful!

Rohr talks about "falling upwards"....in fact he has a new book with this title. I haven't read the book yet but I wonder if he is talking about an ability to let go...to step out...to step off....and not be afraid to fall. I know it seems like a paradox...we want to hold on to security, to all that we have been taught that will keep us safe and well...but Jesus told the ten lepers to just walk out there...there is something in the ability to let go.

Now...this is not easy...I have my stuff that I think keeps me well...my flax seed ground up to put on my oatmeal, my vitamins, my grapefruit seed extract drops if I feel like I am getting a cold, my Gypsy Cold Care tea... we all probably have "stuff" we believe will keep us well...and so the question I am asking myself is...can I still have all that but ALSO let go a little and trust, giving thanks for a larger sense of wellbeing for us all? Might there be some kind of balance in all this?

Emily Dickinson wrote: *The mere sense of living is JOY enough.* And how do we give thanks for that? Do you pray a little thanks into each morning?...do you pray some thankfulness as you go to sleep?...do you hold gratitude in each moment for the fullness that is life itself? How it might improve our lives if we could hold an attitude of gratitude! Perhaps we can give thanks by giving back...like the woman who was spared a great tragedy when her meeting was canceled at the Pentagon on 9/11...so she decided to change careers and now she has a company that makes organic soap!

I was reminded of this little book by Annie Lamont called, "Help! Wow! Thanks!" Here are a few notes from her chapter on "Thanks" and I highly recommend you read her delightful and humorous book.

She says she gives thanks when big disasters have been averted, like when the failing brakes held, or the proliferation of white blood cells was about allergies and not leukemia. She said even atheists give thanks at times like these and agnostics say things like, "The man upstairs must like me" as though he is the dean of admissions!

We give thanks when tragedy was averted...but we give thanks for good times, too...as Lamont writes, *"we give thanks for the magical, mystical magnetic force of quiet or for the exuberant relief when you know that something---has smiled on you big-time..."*

We all know that life is full....it is not always easy, there are going to be times that are scary and hard and downright miserable... But somehow...we can give thanks for the fullness of it all...the joys and the challenges that build us up and strengthen us

and then we love even more deeply, trusting in the larger embrace of God's infinite grace.

Lamont says, "A lot of us religious types go around saying thank you to God when we find a good parking space, or locate the house keys or the wandering phone. And while this can be annoying to people around us...if we are lucky, gratitude becomes a habit."

So let us practice giving thanks...more often...let us this week try giving thanks to God often...to look for the blessings....and saying thank you... as a prayer. One person turned around to give thanks Let us be that person, too... Amen.