

Sermon by Carolyn Chilton  
Grace and Holy Trinity Church  
Richmond, Va  
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II Kings Chapter 5  
Luke 17:11 - 19

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When I accepted this position at GHTC, I sent an email announcement to my friends and colleagues around the country. One of them wrote back and said, “Carolyn, I think you’d better double check that it is really an *Episcopal* church. Calling a staff person for Evangelism and Stewardship doesn’t sound like something an *Episcopal* Church would do.”

Evangelism and Stewardship isn’t a staff position that most Episcopal churches, or even most mainline Protestant churches have. Some churches never even use these two words never mind create a staff position for it! It isn’t an ordinary thing to have created. It is, it seems to me, an extra-ordinary response to how this church wants to live in faithfulness to the gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And that is one reason that I accepted the offer -- to see if GHTC was really serious about being extra-ordinary.

In today’s gospel reading from Luke, we hear of an extra-ordinary response to God’s mercy. It is the story of the 10 lepers.

Leprosy is not a disease that we are very familiar with here in the United States. Thankfully. Part of prevention even today consists of avoiding close physical contact with untreated people. In Jesus’ time, people with leprosy

were taken away from their families and isolated into “leper colonies.” They lived outside the walls of the cities, begging for food and mercy. They were shunned by others. They were probably not even seen by most people.

I’ve never had leprosy. Mind you, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade I had two kinds of measles, chicken pox, mumps *and* I broke my collar bone when I crashed my new red bicycle. My mother had to beg for me to be promoted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade b/c I’d so far exceeded the number of allowed absences’.

But I’ve never had leprosy.

But I think that I know in part what it feels like to be a leper. I’ve been shunned, ignored, ridiculed, and discriminated against. I’ve been an outsider, not one of the “cool people.” I’ve felt invisible.

And I think that you also know what it feels like to be a leper. When have you felt like an outsider? When have you not been in the “cool crowd?” When have you felt invisible?

And as much as we like to think that we don’t do this to others, we do. I turn my nose up at people, I don’t see them for various reasons – they don’t look like me or they’ve made me mad, they don’t agree with me or most often, I’m too busy. As much as we like to think that Christians shouldn’t treat each other like this, we all do it.

The ten lepers in today’s story are living outside the city, and when anyone comes near to them they plead for food and mercy. Along comes Jesus, and we are told that they “called to him in a loud voice.” And then we are told that Jesus saw them. They were no longer invisible. Jesus looked at them and when he saw them he even responded to them and said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.”

According to the laws of the time, only the priests could certify that someone was cured of leprosy. So Jesus says to these 10 lepers, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” He doesn’t say, “You are healed, now go and show yourselves to the priests.” He just says, “Go.” But look at the next sentence... “And as they went, they were made clean.”

The healing took place AFTER they had started on their way to the temple. Their faith in Jesus’ command to ‘go’, their response and participation were part of the healing.

Isn't that also true of Naaman in our Old Testament reading? Just go down to the River Jordan, says the prophet Elisha, and bathe 7 times and you will be healed. Naaman has a nice little hissy fit about that, but when he actually does it, it works! Like the 10 lepers, the response was part of his healing.

But where is the extra-ordinary action in today's gospel? It's in the response of the one leper who stopped and turned back.

Many years ago I was on the bishop's staff in the Diocese of Upper South Carolina. Our offices were part of the Cathedral complex, which had a child care center. One morning I pulled into a parking space at work. Before I could get out of my car, another car pulled in beside me and came to a screeching halt. A young man jumped out of the driver's seat and ran around the front of the car. He swung open the passenger door, and started helping his young son out of his car seat. "Come on son, hurry up, daddy is late for a meeting. Hurry up, son. Daddy is late for a very important meeting." He picked the child up out of the car and stood him on the sidewalk. He grabbed the child's backpack, and slammed the car door. Then he took the child by the wrist and started pulling him down the sidewalk toward the door to the Cathedral's day care. "Come on son, hurry up, daddy is late for a very important meeting." Now what happens when you ask a four year old to hurry up? Right, they go in slow motion. But down the sidewalk they went – hurry up, hurry up. But then, suddenly, the child jerked his arm away from his father's grip, stopped, and pointed to the ground. "Look, daddy, look," he said. "It's a grasshopper." And time stopped. And then, very slowly and deliberately, the father put down the backpack, and they got down on their hands and knees and together they crawled down the sidewalk, into the pine needles, behind the azalea bushes, following the grasshopper. After a few minutes, they stood up, brushed themselves off, joined hands, and walked slowly into the child care center.

The father recognized the "wild and precious" moment that Mary Oliver writes of in her poem "The Summer Day" which is printed in your bulletin. His response was extra-ordinary.

What wild and precious moments have I missed? What wild and precious moments have you missed? What will you do with your one wild and precious life the poet asks? How will you see, reflect and respond? What shapes your responses?

I can only answer those questions for myself. Why do I sometimes notice grasshoppers? What makes me turn back to give thanks? Because I

have remembered from deep within me – in my gut - what it feels like to be ignored and invisible and I have remembered the emptiness and loneliness. But when I take the time to reflect – to look from the inside out, if you will - I also remember how I have come through the loneliness, and it is by God’s grace with the support of family, friends and my church community.

Recognizing my aloneness and the sources of how to re-connect leaves me humbled and grateful. And it gives me a glimpse of how my life can be richer, and I want that richness more than once in a blue moon. Don’t you?

And because grace has come to me so often through community, I want that kind of supportive community for others - the kind of community that we have begun here at GHTC.

Nine of the ten lepers hurried to the priests in order to be certified as clean. Only one turned back and gave praise and thanks. “Get up and go on your way;” Jesus then says to the that leper. “Your faith has made you well.” The grateful leper's action made him extra-ordinary.

Through gratitude we see the gift and the giver. Gratitude is an extraordinary response that calls us to greater participation with the giver and in the community of the giver – the church.

One expression of our gratitude is to give of our time, treasures and talents to this church. You will soon be asked to make a commitment for the coming year to the mission of GHTC – you will be asked to respond and participate. A pledge is an act of gratitude to God and a commitment to ourselves, to God and to our community. A commitment to become extraordinary individuals.

In particular you will soon be asked to make a commitment of your treasure – a financial pledge. For those of you who already make a financial pledge to this church, you will be asked to renew your commitment to God, yourself and to the work we do together as GHTC. For those of you who do not yet make a financial commitment, you will be asked to begin making that commitment to God, yourself and to our work together. We are all being asked to be participants, to live inside out, to turn back in gratitude to the God who gives to us each day.

The Christian way of life is a participatory way. To be Christian means to be part of a community and to make a commitment and take responsibility for the life and work of that community.

Ten lepers received healing, but only one turned back in gratitude. His turning back set him apart and made him extra-ordinary.

I started this sermon, by saying that one of the reasons that I took this position at GHTC was to see if you were serious about being an extra-ordinary church. And what I have seen and experienced since I have been here are countless acts and people who are indeed out of the ordinary. But are we extra-ordinary? We have, I believe, the rare potential of a church to become truly extra-ordinary. We have the potential to be like the one leper who noticed, responded and became an active participant in his own wholeness and no doubt that of the community around him. Together, we can do that.

Grace and Holy Trinity Church, what will you do with this one wild and precious life together? Will you be extra-ordinary?

Which of the lepers are you? Given the gift of healing, how will you respond?  
Amen.

“The Summer Day”, by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean –  
The one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
The one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
Who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –  
Who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
Into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
Which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?  
([www.poetryconnection.net](http://www.poetryconnection.net))