

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost C 2025
October 12, 2025
2 Kings 5:1-19 and Luke 17:1-10
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

A few days ago, as I was pondering and praying about what to preach this week, the Spirit said to me, "Tell the story of the time you preached at Bethlehem Lutheran Church..." I have to confess, I was a little taken aback, since I haven't thought about that in a long time. Also, in the beginning I wasn't quite sure how that story dovetails with today's Scripture readings, but if I've learned one thing over the years, it's this: When the Spirit nudges you to do something, it's wise to trust and obey!

So, I went for a walk, and while I was out walking my neighborhood, I took a trip down memory lane to that day almost 14 years ago. After allowing my heart and mind to pause at various rest stops along the way, here's some of what I remember about the worship service that took place at Bethlehem Lutheran Church on that day long ago: It was late November of 2011. In fact, it was Christ the King Sunday, the threshold to the beginning of a new church year..... Members from many congregations in North, Northeast, and Southeast Portland had come together to worship and show solidarity with our siblings in Christ from Bethlehem Lutheran Church. We showed up to grieve AND to celebrate AND to wonder. Together we grieved the loss of their old church building, which was being sold because they could no longer afford to maintain it. Together we celebrated by giving God thanks and praise for the congregation's many years of faithful and fruitful ministry in the name of Christ. As we stood with our siblings from Bethlehem on the threshold of their new journey, we wondered with them, "What next, God? What next?..."

Friends, in spite of the sadness of Bethlehem's impending holy closure, I have to say that worshiping with all those people was an incredible experience. But for me personally, the thing that left a lasting impression was the children's message facilitated by Pastor Solveig Nilsen-Goodin. Pastor Solveig, who was serving the mission congregation known as "Wilderness Way" at the time, also had close ties with the members of Bethlehem. So, on that Sunday morning, she gathered the children around her in a circle. Many of them were children of Bethlehem because a previous pastor, Joan Beck, had made an intensive effort to minister to and with

young families.... Pastor Solveig invited the kids to look around the huge sanctuary and to think about the church building as a whole. She invited them to think about what the land might have looked like before there ever was a building on it. Maybe there were lots of trees and a big field. Maybe the indigenous peoples who once lived here grew food or lived on this land. Maybe animals lived there.... Then Pastor Solveig said this, “No matter what the land looked then, no matter who lived there, it all belonged to God back then, and it still does.” Then Pastor Solveig helped the kids--and also the adults—remember the ones who had come together a long time ago to dream the congregation of Bethlehem Lutheran Church into being and to create the building where so many generations worshiped, attended Sunday School, and lovingly served others in the name of Christ. She repeated the mantra, “It all belonged to God then, and it still belongs to God.” Finally, Pastor Solveig helped everyone imagine the new people who might come onto that land and into that building in the future. She explained that the building had been sold to a Buddhist congregation and that Buddhists are people who understand God somewhat differently than Christians do, but they, too, belong to God—just as we do! She wrapped up by telling everyone, “Even though we’re sad that we won’t get to worship here anymore, it helps to know that God will be here in this building with the new people, AND it helps to know that God will be with us wherever we go because IT ALL BELONGS TO GOD...” Then we joined in offering a prayer of thanksgiving for all God’s blessings—past, present, and future—and we asked God to help the new owners of Bethlehem’s building and property be wise and compassionate stewards of the gifts entrusted to their care.

Pastor Solveig is right: “It all belongs to God,” the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen.... And that means everything you and I have and all we are is a complete and total gift from God. But here’s the thing, friends: Most of the time you and I don’t think about things that way, do we? I mean, when I look around at what’s happening in our culture and our world today, it seems many of us take things for granted. Sometimes we even look at what we have—wealth, possessions, status, leisure time, and even relationships—and think, “That’s mine. I’m entitled to it. I’ve worked hard and earned it!...” My friends, when you and I go down that pathway, we’re heading down the slippery slope that leads us away from Scripture’s reminder that “every good and perfect gift is from above.” And when we forget that everything is pure gift, we begin to forget who we are: children of God, who’ve been entrusted with an abundance of gifts to be shared with others—NOT hoarded for ourselves until they become a worthless, stinking pile of rotten manna....

On Wednesday afternoon, Zoar's Care Team met to talk about the needs of folks who are ill and on our homebound list. Someone asked, "Doesn't it seem like there's a lot of cancer in our community?" We all nodded. So. Much. Cancer! And strokes. And dementia. And COVID. And so much more!... All these illnesses have got me thinking a lot about one of the God-given gifts many of us take for granted until it becomes threatened or is taken away from us: namely, our health. This is true for us as individuals, and it's also true for our families, for our church bodies, and for other groups to which we belong.... One of the things I learned while teaching a class when I was a young associate pastor is that health is always relative. What one person or group considers good health will look very different from what another views as good health because we have different baselines and different experiences.... I've also noticed that when it comes to our personal health, those of us who are privileged to have resources tend to view convenient and affordable access to health care as something we deserve—much as we view our material possessions. But at present, many of us are discovering that convenient and affordable access is no longer available to us, just as they've never been true to most people! For example, I've heard from a number of you comment about how hard it is to get a medical appointment these days, and my own experience confirms this. Besides that, most of us are acutely aware of the rising cost of prescriptions, medical care, and insurance, and I'm sorry to say it looks like those costs are only going to escalate in the future....

Turning to today's Scripture reading from 1 Kings, we see that some things never change! Here we meet Naaman, a Syrian general. He's an example of someone who sees himself as very important and, therefore, deserving of the best care. Naaman is a powerful man of great standing in his society. No doubt, he's used to getting exactly what he wants and needs—right now, thank you very much!... So, when he finds himself afflicted with a skin disease that jeopardizes everything he has and is, Naaman tries to take command of the situation. When his wife's Israelite slave girl mentions a prophet in Israel who has the power to heal his disease, Naaman immediately goes straight to the top: to the king of Aram, who sends a letter to the king of Israel, introducing Naaman and asking for his healing. Well, when the king of Israel reads the letter asking him to heal Naaman, he thinks it's a setup for the king of Aram to attack him, and he's terrified. After all, he, the king, doesn't possess the power to heal others!... Cue the prophet Elisha, who comes to the rescue, saying, "Send the general to me, so he can see there IS a prophet in Israel!..." You and I need to pay close attention to what happens next because it's quite revealing! Naaman's huge ego almost gets in the way of his own healing.

Clearly, his ego is bruised because the prophet won't come outside to personally heal a VIP like himself, and he's doubly insulted when Elisha sends instructions that he should go immerse himself in the Jordan River seven times in order to be healed. At this, Naaman turns away in rage, declaring that the rivers of his homeland are far superior to the Jordan. But fortunately for Naaman, his servants manage to talk some sense into him; indeed, they coax coax him into bathing in the Jordan. And guess what! In keeping with Elisha's promise, Naaman is immediately restored to health.... I can't help wondering: Do you know any Naamans? [Show of hands, if you know someone who tends to get tripped up by their own ego!... Yeah, many of us do!}]

So, let's take a look at what happens next. When Naaman sees that his skin has been miraculously restored to a youthful state, he recognizes that the miraculous gift of healing he's received is a gift from God. This leads him to make a bold confession of faith in the presence of Elisha: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." However, you and I know that Naaman doesn't yet fully "get" who God is because he persists in trying to pay for his healing, even though Elisha says "no" to all gifts.

Besides omitting some key details of Naaman's story--which I've filled in for you--today's passage from 2 Kings also ends in an unfortunate place because it doesn't tell the rest of the story. (Just FYI, this is only one of many examples of why it's important that you and I exercise great care in taking biblical stories and verses out of their larger context. When we do, it's easy to misunderstand them, and it can also be dangerous, as is the case with the so-called "clobber" passages traditionally used to condemn and bully LGBTQ persons.)

So, here's the rest of the story—the part that's NOT printed in your worship bulletin: After Naaman offers his gifts to Elisha, who declines them, hinting perhaps that God's gifts cannot be bought, then Naaman asks, "Well, since you won't take my gifts, can I take home two wagonloads of dirt, so that I worship God on this soil?" Elisha gives him permission to do so. Then Naaman asks to be pardoned in advance because he knows he'll occasionally need to bow down to his master's god, Rimmon. Elisha responds by saying, "Go in peace." On that note, Naaman returns home to Syria, taking the dirt with him, so that he can worship the one true God on soil that comes from Israel.

To recap, we've already established that once Naaman is healed, he comes to believe in God, and he immediately returns to give thanks and praise to God in the presence of Elisha. Now, I can't speak for you, friends, but I have questions! For example, I can't help wondering: What will Naaman do with God's gift of healing once he's returned to his home? Will he slide back into his old, entitled way of life? Will he use the dirt to create a small garden where he can worship God in private, essentially keeping his faith to himself? Or will he respond in abundant gratitude by sharing his faith in God with his family, friends, and neighbors?

I have similar questions about the ten people Jesus heals in today's reading from Luke 17" How will the nine who went on their way without saying "thank you" respond to God's gift of healing over the long haul? And how will the one foreigner who immediately turned back to praise God respond to the gift of healing over his lifetime?... While we can never know for certain, we do know that gratitude is like a muscle: It needs to be exercised, in order to become stronger. Given this, I think we can safely say that the Samaritan whom Jesus heals is one who has already been practicing gratitude amidst his affliction. Since his first response to being healed is praise and thanksgiving, he's likely to continue practicing gratitude, and his future response to God's gift of healing will be to go home and share with others the Good News of God revealed through Jesus Christ.

BUT there's something deeper going on here.... In her weekly newsletter for today, church historian Diana Butler Bass points out that gratefulness by itself cannot heal us. At the end of our gospel story, Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Your faith has made you well." And when Jesus speaks of faith, he's NOT talking about some doctrine we memorize to state our belief about God; Jesus is talking about faith as trust, and trust is something we can only experience in relationship.

In conclusion, Diana Butler Bass offers two helpful observations. Firstly, she states the obvious, noting that God's gifts don't depend on our gratefulness. Even when we don't express our gratitude—which is most of the time!--God faithfully and generously continues to shower humankind and our world with many gifts. And God's gifts are poured out freely and without discrimination; as Jesus declares in the Sermon on the Mount, "God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends the rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous..." Secondly, Butler Bass calls us to notice that though our hearts may truly be filled with gratitude, "somehow the inner experience is not quite complete without an outward expression"—that is, without a change in our actions. She concludes:

When gratitude becomes an action, it can change everything—it transforms our ability to see the giftedness of our lives, to stop taking the great generosity of the Gifter for granted, and to freely respond with attentive trust.

You don't ever have to say thank you. God's love never ceases: the gifts never end. And yet, it is good to notice how extraordinary it truly is—this gracious love, this gifted life. Trusting that, being attentive to it, makes us whole.

Trusting it and *acting upon it* might just turn things around.

Friends, I believe Diana Butler Bass is on to something here. Imagine what we could do—imagine the healing and wholeness we could bring to our families, to our communities, and to this world God so loves—if we practiced responding with thankfulness and praise.... I know I want to be a part of God's work of shalom. How about you?