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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

18th Sunday after Pentecost

October 9, 2022

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Ps. 111; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

The region between Samaria and Galilee where our gospel story takes place today is a liminal space, or a place on both sides of a boundary. If you looked at the Holy Land on a biblical map, it's the area to the west of the Jordan River and north of Jerusalem, but it's neither the northern region of Galilee nor the southern region of Samaria. Instead, it's kind of what you would call a "no-mans land." That's where the 10 lepers in this gospel story were hanging out, and where Jesus was traveling through on his way to Jerusalem.

The lepers lived in this physical liminal space, but they also were living in a figurative liminal space. They were clearly people of faith who knew who Jesus was—they were the ones who called out to him, "Jesus, master, have mercy on us"—but they were unable to live out their faith in community because they were prohibited from being around other people. Having a skin disease made them ritually unclean, so they had to keep their distance from others and call out whenever anyone came close to them. It makes sense they were hanging out in a liminal space since they themselves were socially, religiously, and psychologically liminal – they didn't really belong anywhere.

Although my experience pales in comparison, I feel like I was living in a liminal space this week being sick with a mild case of Covid. I was contagious enough at first that I had to isolate in my bedroom for 5 days, but not sick enough that I couldn't work. I would feel fine one moment and the next I'd have to lie down and take a nap. I lived with my family but didn't really live with my family. I was kind of ok, but not really ok. I felt like I, too, was living in a liminal space.

When you're in a liminal space it's hard to know what to do or how to be. You don't feel totally in one place or the other, you haven't quite gotten from one place to the next, from one state of being to another. I'm wondering if that's kind of how the past 2 ½ years have been for all of us,

literally the entire planet. During the height of the pandemic and even continuing now we have been in this liminal space between "normal" and "not normal." Between things being ok and things not being ok.

Our church may even feel like it's in a liminal space. It's still church—we still have worship and education and activities and service opportunities—but it's not the same as it has been, and some people have gone while others have come. We're still trying to adjust to this new normal, this post-Covid, second historical reformation of the Christian church.

And today we're going to be making our financial pledges to Christ Lutheran during a liminal time when inflation has hit us and the economy is questionable and yet we know that our church needs our financial support. We're really living in a liminal space. We too, are crying out, "Jesus, master, have mercy on us!"

I heard a story this week about a woman who kept a gratitude journal as a spiritual practice—every night she would write in her journal things she was grateful for that day. The year after her husband died she was looking back in her journal, and as she approached the entry with the date of her husband's death, she was nervous that she wouldn't find anything written there. Things had been such a blur the day she became a widow—she had been in such a liminal space—that she could hardly remember what had happened. But as she turned the page and started reading, she was reminded of all the people who had reached out to her and supported her that day. She read line after line after line of the things she was grateful for, on the very worst day of her life. And it reminded her that it was because of all those things she listed in gratitude that she made it through that liminal time. Honoring them intentionally in her journal helped her to see how God had been healing and comforting her at the time, and continued to even a year later when she looked back at her words.

I'm reminded in this gospel that Jesus does his best work in liminal spaces, like this one with the lepers, or with those on the margins, or with a grieving widow. In liminal spaces Jesus heals, offers grace, and grants belonging. It's what he did with all of the 10 lepers, and yet it was only one of them—a Samaritan, no less—who turned back to prostrate himself and Jesus' feet and thank him, whose faith had truly made him well.

The word for “well” in v. 19 can be translated from Greek in several ways—probably my favorite is the King James Version which says, your faith has made you “whole,” but it also can mean “healed” or “saved.” Jesus works to bring healing, salvation, and wholeness in liminal times. And it is when we offer thanks that we truly realize it and benefit from it. Giving thanks—like the leper did, like the grieving widow did—to offer thanks even when things are not as they have been, helps us understand how God is constantly working to bring about transformation and resurrection, even and especially in the liminal times.

Today when you place your pledge in the offering plate, you will be offering a gift of thanks. Really, our gifts back to God that come in the form of money are like our own form of a gratitude journal, or our own version of a thank you note. Stewardship is a response of gratitude and thanksgiving for what God has done for us and the world in Jesus Christ.

So, if you individually or we collectively are in a liminal space today, offering a pledge in the face of things being liminal is how we will recognize how God is working to bring about transformation and resurrection in your life in and in the church. Entrusting back to God our gifts as a sign of thanks is how we, like the Samaritan, like the widow, will recognize God who is working to bring about healing, salvation, and wholeness. Because liminal space is where God, where Jesus, work best. Amen.