

# The free gift of healing

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,  
at the eleven o'clock service, October 10, 2010: The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Luke 17:11-19.*

“Please and thank you” my mother used to say. That was code for “If you don’t ask with a please and respond with a thank you, you are not getting anything, big boy.” It was life as we knew it in the Stallings’ family, and by and large it served us well. Dysfunction aside, we were a polite family.

Fascinating for you to know I am sure, but let me be clear: this gospel story has nothing to do with that. As far as we know there is no evidence that Mary employed the “please and thank you” rule when Jesus was a boy; but honestly in my thoroughly domesticated view of the Holy Family, my imagination is that she did and that Jesus grew up to be quite polite as in, “Thank you very much, you brood of vipers.” Though this gospel is not about that, it does cause us to contemplate the place of gratitude in our own hearts, gratitude that far exceeds the etiquette of expressing it, gratitude that casts us to our knees when we behold the profound love of God. Another sermon could and should explore the place of gratitude as the encompassing context for our lives.

So if not that, not primarily a lesson in gratitude, what then is the point of this story of Jesus and the lepers? Though this claim may be too reductionist for some, it seems to me that this account and indeed all the gospel stories, snippets of life as Jesus was remembered by the community, exist above all else to show us something about the nature of God and our capacity to respond. The message here is twofold. First, the God from whom Jesus comes is a God who cares in a direct way about the pain and suffering that exist in creation, whether we are speaking of the physical pain and suffering of a group of lepers

or the languishing of a society stuck in its own self-obsession and a lack of imagination. And second, in the providence of this God, there are no outcasts, and we are the vessels of this healing truth.

This story is one in a genre of stories about healing, stories that claim miraculous power for Jesus, each one delivering a message that God’s desire for us is that we lead healthy whole lives of integrity and goodness. How that gets lived out in the curing and healing of God’s people is a complicated matter and is less the point than the fact that God *desires* fullness for us. That is to say, we don’t have to believe (though it is fine if you do) the magic of the story, the instant disappearance of any signs of the devastating disease visited on these poor souls, to understand the point: God is on the side of healing and health.

In fact, to be even more specific, I must admit that I don’t have much personal experience with God’s curing people. Some people get sick and get better, while others—equally faithful—get sick and die. Curing aside, though, I do have immense experience with healing. I have witnessed people desperately sick and miserable, who upon becoming aware of their place in the heart of God have been transformed, healed and changed from a marked and doomed individual to a child of God now ready, willing and able to face with hope and courage whatever was to come. I can even do one better than that. I myself have been that sick and miserable creature and no doubt shall be again; but by the grace of God, divine grace often coming to me through the touch of another human being who happens to love me, I will be healed again. I will not always be cured, and

neither will you, but I will be healed, for healing is the free gift God offered to all who seek it.

And it is a gift that once given to us becomes a gift that can be shared and in fact is our obligation to share. In speaking of this story as it is told in another gospel, the late Madeline L'Engle once observed that Jesus didn't start a lepers' rights organization (not that there would be anything particularly wrong with that). Jesus didn't initiate a huge system or start a new program. What he did, Ms. L'Engle suggested, was to give himself to the lepers, in some cases touching them and in all cases seeing them, taking the time to look into the eyes of these largely invisible folks, meeting them right where and who they were. That, my beloved friends, is the ministry to which we who would follow Jesus are called—to see those who are not seen, to touch those whose lives reside at the margins either through sickness or some differentness about them.

I don't know a lot about Tyler Clementi, probably about as much as you do, just what I have read in the paper about this tragedy of teenage angst and suicide. I don't know if Tyler had a church experience, and if he did, what he heard in that setting about himself, about his essence. Beyond a doubt, though, the church voice, the church at large, has been mixed and predominantly painful in the lives of young gay and lesbian persons. I can't help but wonder if the church, the body of Christ, had been loud and clear in its teaching that each person, as created, exists as the apple of God's eye, as the psalmist writes, this precious young man, someone's young son, might not have jumped off that bridge. Tyler, cherished by God but somehow not having heard that truth, in despair jumping to his death—an event so sad and troubling that it has grabbed

the heart of the nation. Maybe, just maybe if the church got converted on this issue alone and could lead the way, the sound of love would be loud enough to extinguish the hate-filled monikers that weasel and often blast their way into the consciousnesses of our children, kids who are different, kids who begin to believe those awful things said and implied about them. Could the message of a loving and inclusive church have saved Tyler Clementi? Who can say?

Can there truly be any doubt about the position Jesus would take in this conversation, Jesus who placed himself every time squarely and unequivocally on the margin? Jesus showed us how to be emissaries of a God who is for healing. He showed us the way by truly seeing those around him, those who looked and acted like him and those who didn't. He lived love writ large by refusing to live within the boundaries of Jews versus Samaritans. He taught us by recognizing and cherishing the divine, the good, the salvageable in each person he met. Each one of us has that capacity to heal, to heal through the power of love and grace, realities that exist beyond our understanding. Oh, how I wish that someone could have been there to love Tyler like that.

In the continual surprise of grace, what we come to learn is that when we love like that, when we allow God to use us in the healing of others, we find that we too are healed; we learn that healing is contagious. Suddenly we begin to experience healing in the damaged nooks and crannies of our own hearts, places where we are most hurt and afraid and marginalized. And, slowly, we too find our lives filled with gratitude too deep for words.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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