

Pastor Ulrich Noetzel – Sermon September 17, 2017

(14th Sunday after Trinity)

Readings: Genesis 28.10-19 and Luke 17.11-19

When you approach the city of Narbonne in the South of France, you can see its cathedral for miles as it rises above the roofs of the city.

It is the third or fourth highest cathedral in France – the highest in the South of France. But strangely enough, when you approach it, it becomes invisible, hidden amongst the houses.

Not only is it surrounded by houses, but it also consists only of the choir. The transept and the nave were started but never finished. Money had been a problem, more importantly however: the authorities were not prepared to pull down the city walls to enable the architectural ambitions of the cathedral chapter.

So to this day the cathedral of Narbonne only the fragment of a cathedral: a very big, a very beautiful choir, but nevertheless only the choir....

As there is no nave, you enter the church from the side. The entrance is a fairly small porch, which you find almost by accident after walking through the Bishop's Palace and then some picturesque, but not very big cloisters.

Let's enter the cathedral!

We find ourselves standing amongst a sea of burning candles. Their light is reflected by hundreds of small white marble plaques saying: „Merci“ – „Thank you“. A hundredfold „Thank you!“ In the midst of this cloud of gratitude is a statue of the Christchild held by his mother.

The „Thank-You“ plaques and the candles are joined into a living prayer that draws you into the church and makes you join with all your senses. So as you enter this church your whole being breathes: Thank you!

Each candle, each plaque stands for a story, a life changed, an experience of salvation.

Some of the „Thank You“s will have come after a spontaneous experience: survival in an accident, healing of an illness maybe. (Like the Samaritan who finds himself healed while he is on the way. And so returns and spontaneously thanks Jesus.)

Other „Merci“s will stand for carefully crafted prayers fulfilled. (Like Jacob who promises a thank you - but wants to see first if God's promises will really come to pass: „*if* God is with me... *then* the Lord will be my God“ and only then he'll institute regular worship as a thank you.)

All these stories are just one whisper in the great unified, white marbled „Merci - Thank You“ that is lifted up to God with the light and the warmth of the candles cradled in the prayers of those who add their gratitude or requests as they pass.

On the surface „gratitude“ seems to be the main topic of today's gospel. After last week's „Good Samaritan“ we have the „grateful Samaritan“ this week and I believe that many sermons today will be preached around the idea that we are somehow lacking in thankfulness.

I disagree.

No, we have not forgotten to say thank you and I don't think we are ungrateful. Some things we take for granted and it might be good to remember not to take them for granted by re-learning to say thank you to God. But I do not want to bemoan the fact that there is no gratitude around anymore.

But gratitude is not the only topic in this reading – and as I would like to show – not the most important one.

I want to start with a small observation: There is something really annoying about this little story told by Luke.

It is the way Jesus behaves. Jesus does not appear to be very kind, loving or even possessing interpersonal skills.

Every time I read this I am astonished how little communication happens here.

The ten lepers submit to Jesus by shouting „Master“ – they in fact declare themselves disciples (The word that Luke uses is otherwise used when the disciples address Jesus).

And they submit to Jesus' mercy: Eleison ymas – have mercy!

(They use the same words we still use in our liturgy...)

This is a big thing, but Jesus seems not to be open to their submission. Their attempt to get into contact with Jesus is brusquely cut short by Jesus' reply: Go away, show yourself to the priests.

Jesus does not want any contact. He sends them away.

(This could have to do with their leprosy. And with expected behaviour... It may not have been as bad to them as it appears to us today – but compare it to the legend of St Francis who went out of his way to embrace a leper in order to show him his solidarity and re-integrate him.)

Jesus seems to be strangely aloof to their strife. And this strange way of communicating continues as the story intensifies:

When the Samaritan returns, praising God in a loud voice, prostrating himself before Jesus, and thanking him – Jesus does not acknowledge him.

He turns to his disciples instead and asks them an academic question – not even about this man, but about the other ones who haven't come back.

He still does not want to have any contact with this man it seems. He is more interested in having a discussion with his disciples. He also singles him out as a foreigner.

Only in the last verse of our story Jesus addresses the Samaritan directly, and again he sends him away, but this time with a big promise: go ... your faith has saved you.

The whole setting seems to resemble an experiment, set up to prove some point: Jesus is trying to teach his disciples something. And through them we are to hear it, too.

From the ending of this story I would think that it is mainly about faith.

Your faith has saved you! – Jesus’ parting words for the Samaritan must be the key for understanding this encounter.

Faith saves, whereas obedience and discipleship merely heal or cleanse. – This is what you find if you closely observe the Greek words that Luke uses in this story.

Faith seems to be more than obedience or even discipleship.

So let us look at the protagonists of this „experiment“:

Exhibit A – “The ten”

The ten have a great trust in Jesus’ abilities. They dare to confront him on his way. They trust that he might help them in their affliction.

They are looking for healing – for this they submit to Jesus and call him “Master” like a disciple.

Faith is not mentioned at the beginning of the story.

Could it be that faith involves more than trusting in someone’s ability to help?

Exhibit B – “The nine”

The nine obey Jesus command to go and show themselves to the priests.

I think this is the primary reason why they don’t come back.

Not only do they do, what Jesus told them.

They also conform to what Scripture commands in such circumstances.

They must be declared clean before they can be reintegrated into society and rejoin their families.

As they were somewhere on the border of Galilee and Samaria, it would have been a long way to Jerusalem to see their priest, or even if they went to a local one.

But why should they come back to Jesus? They do exactly as Jesus has told them. They follow the rules.

They accepted him as master and now they behave as obedient disciples.

Exhibit C - “The Samaritan”

He’s not kosher. Not only is he a foreigner, but his religion is dodgy as well. That makes him a double outcast: leper and Samaritan.

He is different even before the story starts.

But he is also the one who acts differently:

He defies Jesus’ command and does what he thinks is right.

He sets an example that nobody else follows.

In a paradox way the Samaritan disobeys Jesus in order to do his will.

The nine were healed and re-integrated into society.

The Samaritan was saved and integrated into the family of God.

At the very end, Jesus finally talks to him – and sends him away – again! This time with less cryptic words, but words that are reassuring:

Rise and go; your faith has made you well. Literally in the Greek: Your faith has saved you.

Why is his faith mentioned here? Why is faith not mentioned in the context of the other nine?

Could one difference be that whereas the nine trusted in Jesus' abilities to heal and were ready to submit to his orders, the Samaritan also saw Jesus as a person and hence he went back to thank him?

He saw *who* Jesus was rather than just what he could do.

But back to the disciples and Jesus –

That could be Exhibit D:

What is Jesus trying to tell his disciples ? (And when he talks to his disciples he talks to his congregation – that means us!)

Let us remind ourselves of the starting point of our story:

The nine trust in their prayer. They are heard. Their life is changed. They get converted and get a command, a calling for their life: „Go, and show yourself to the priest.“

This is what they set out to do. They follow their calling like the disciples.

So far so good.

However, they follow their calling in a very static way as the comparison with the Samaritan shows.

Whereas he changes his plans on the discovery that he is healed, they continue.

It reminds me of people who follow their faith without looking right or left, without ever being challenged by circumstances and changing times, or other people's approaches to faith. People who once gained a conviction and steadfastly cling to it, disregarding science, common sense, good manners and loving one's neighbour while rigorously following God.

They display the traits of people who bring religion into disrepute.

The Samaritan, however, changes his mind. He remains flexible – in his calling, in his faith, in his thinking and his actions.

In a paradox way the Samaritan had to disobey Jesus in order to do what is right.

He uses his common sense, his feelings, his good manners together with his faith. And he realizes that thanking God, thanking Jesus is now – at this moment in time – the right thing to do.

As Jesus points out at the end: It is his faith which enabled him to do so. His faith, his trust in God, allows him to challenge even Jesus' command to see the priest. His faith lets him do the right thing, which is praising God and thanking Jesus.

We see in this story that faith has a flexibility to adapt to new situations. A trust that goes deeper than the straight line of following commandments.

The Samaritan has made his choice and thus he has discovered faith.

And through his faith maybe he also points us to another reality, a deeper meaning of this story, of which neither he nor Luke had any idea:

The Letter to the Hebrews is full of the imagery of Jesus our High Priest.

Maybe, the Samaritan followed Jesus' command after all. Maybe he went to his new priest straight away: Jesus.

This takes us back to the beginning of the story and of this sermon. (Jesus is – after all – the beginning and the end.)

The message for our own spiritual lives is:

We all start with earnest prayer: „Lord, have mercy on us.“

From the call of „Mercy“ our faith will take us to the place where we can say „Merci“ to God and Jesus.

But along the way we have to trust in God and have faith to see where this takes us.

We might be in for a surprise as it could turn out to be a completely different place from what we or other Christians expect.

Amen.