

**LESSONS FROM A FOREIGNER; LUKE 17:11-19; 10.9.16; THOMAS H. YORTY;
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Garrett Martin and I are taking our new, administrative assistant Matt Marco to lunch this week because his ninety-day probationary period (standard for all new employees) is over and we want to step back and check in with Matt.

Matt, as many of you have already experienced, is as outstanding in his new job for Westminster as he was two years ago when he was our Glynda S. Taylor Organ Scholar and as he still is in his professional life as a musician. At our meeting we won't be spending time on performance issues as much as turning the tables and asking Matt to tell us what he sees in us as a staff and in our operations at Westminster that might be improved.

Such as: are there things we're doing that don't need to be done or that could be done better or things we aren't doing that should be on our agenda. This is a conversation we have with every new staff person before the four-month mark because by then those new employees become used to the way of life, habits, norms and methodology of this place. And they lose their fresh eyes from the unique vantage point they have from simply being new to WPC.

All of us get fixed in our ways and used to routine to the extent that eventually we are less aware if not blind to ourselves and the world around us.

Then some train-wreck occurs, like it literally did in Hoboken, NJ last week and suddenly everyone is scouring the situation, scrutinizing everything from the engineer to the technology to the architecture of the train station asking, "What went wrong? Could we have prevented this? What changes need to be made?"

You can draw the parallels to our personal lives and relationships, to the life and mission of a congregation. When we become inured with our surroundings and even the pulse of life within, we run the risk of operating as visually, spiritually, and/or emotionally impaired.

This is an age-old problem. The story of much of the New Testament is the story of one religious system and leadership so ossified, brittle, legalistic and set in its ways that when the leader of what becomes a new religious movement appears on the scene he is branded an apostate to the faith and traitor to the state.

Jesus was not interested in starting a new religious movement; that work was given to the Apostle Paul. Jesus was a bona fide Jew; the core of his message was that he did not come to change one jot or tittle of the law but to offer a new way of seeing and applying the law of Moses to daily life.

Same with Martin Luther, he had no intention of founding an entire new branch of Christianity; he was an Augustinian monk, as faithful to Rome as anyone; he just happened to read his Bible with fresh eyes as a novice and ask concerning the church: "What's wrong with this picture?" Nietzsche said blind conformity to any school of thought or art or system of government or philosophy, robs us of life, freedom.

The story of the grateful leper is Luke's answer to this problem. It is comparable to Mark and Matthew's parable of the sower.

When Jesus begins the parable in those gospels he tells his audience, "Listen!" After the parable he says, "Anyone who has ears to hear let them hear."

The parable of the sower is the story of how some seed falls on rocky soil, some on good soil – the parable itself, the gospel itself, Jesus himself is seed thrown onto the earth and into our hearts – some hearts are rocky; but some are good soil that will germinate the seed to grow and produce fruit. Listening makes our hearts fertile ground.

I say the grateful leper is comparable to the parable of the sower in this sense: if the sower is about listening, the thankful leper is about seeing. Luke could have preceded this story with the single command, "See!" and concluded with the admonition, "Anyone who has eyes to see, let them see."

What is it this story urges us to see? We are tipped off when Luke uses the same phrase – "*when he saw*" two times; after the lepers cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Luke says, "*when he (Jesus) saw* them," he said "show yourselves to the priests." And when the ten make way for the priests, Luke reports, (referring to the Samaritan leper) "*when he saw* that he was healed, he went back praising God and prostrated himself before Jesus."

The story of the grateful leper is less about healing than it is about seeing. Seeing as fresh recognition of the world around us; and, then, seeing as action that results from our new awareness.

I want to note how masterful Luke is as a story teller. Just last week he uses the disciples to show us what spiritual traps we fall into; after he tells them what it takes to be a disciple they demand that Jesus give them more faith (how many times have we said 'If I had more faith, more courage, more whatever I'd do this or that or be a better person!'); to which Jesus says it's not the amount of faith that counts (even tiny faith has the power to do great things) it's using the faith you have.

Then following on the heels of that story, today's story of the grateful leper juxtaposes this shunned, looked-down upon, lowly Samaritan as the only one of ten lepers *who sees* the source of his healing. The others, Luke implies, are good Presbyterians because Jesus tells them to go to the Stated Clerk to get certificates of good health, yet only this lowly Mormon who is clearly not of white, Anglo-Saxon descent (Samaritans were considered by Jews to be half-breeds) sees that the healing came from Jesus and returns to thank him.

Then the punch line of the story: Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Your faith has made you 'sozo' in the Greek," which means, "Your faith has saved you." You see, the Samaritan is not only healed he is saved because he sees and responds to the source of his healing. This is not just semantics; the thankful leper experiences more than liberation from his leprosy; his delight and expressions of gratitude distinguish him from the others and are why he is saved. The nine are impoverished by their lack of joy or ability to praise God or see God at work in their lives, regardless of being "good Presbyterians."

You see, this is a story about spiritual discernment. What difference does this make in a life you ask. Isn't spiritual discernment for holy people? People who commit themselves to becoming open to God's presence in their lives by entering monasteries, and praying seven times a day, even going so far as to become hermits to quiet the world around them so that they can hear the world within them.

Few if any of us are called to that way of life. Yet, you don't have to leave the world to discern God trying to get your attention; indeed, John Calvin believed the great adventure of life is finding God in the everyday with all of the conflicting, confusing messages, agendas, thoughts, and feelings we have.

Kierkegaard said we live our faith forward and understand it backward. We look back on a day or a lifetime and see God's hands in a summer job or internship, a book someone gave us, an errand we had to run and we met someone or acquired some skill or discovered some resource and found our calling in that moment or over a career.

Even in the midst of the Civil War Abraham Lincoln was able to discern the right path to keep the union whole by not condemning or rejecting the south, though his mission was to eradicate slavery.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address discerned the path to reknitting the torn social and cultural fabric of the nation not by gloating or boasting in victory but with humility, extending the hand of peace to start the process of healing.

This is what makes great leaders and people – the ability to discern the presence and will of God in the midst of the battles we face in life.

William Barber II referred to by some as the Martin Luther King, Jr. of our generation wrote an op-ed column in the *New York Times* two weeks ago after the protesting in Charlotte in the wake of the shooting of yet another black man.

Barber said the protests are not blacks against whites or black people versus the police. The protesters are black, white and brown people, crying out against police brutality and systemic violence. "*If we can see them through the tear gas,*" Barber writes, they show us a way forward to peace with justice."

Barber continues, "As a pastor and organizer I do not condone violent protest. But I join the demonstrators in condemning the systemic violence that threatened Mr. Scott long before an officer decided to use lethal force against him. Every child on that bus, every person in Mr. Scott's neighborhood is subject to systemic violence everyday; violence that will increase if politicians continue to exploit to specter of violent protests for political gain by calling for 'law and order'."ⁱ

The story of the grateful leper is also a story of ancient racism.

Luke was unrelenting in his use of the outcast and second-class citizens to instruct his church; to teach them to watch for God in the lowly.

Which raises the question: are we open to seeing God in someone from the other side of the political, ethnic, religious tracks and be taught in matters we consider ourselves settled or expert in and whose opinion we would not usually seek or even respect?

This is a critical question if you find yourself at some plateau in life, or some cross roads of decision-making; actually it's important if everything is going swimmingly and life is good; without an awareness of where those blessings come from that's when we can run headlong into what John Bunyan called the slough of despond, or some ordinary crisis of life can throw us into a spiritual tailspin.

This is a critical question for the church in general and the Presbyterian Church and this church in particular. The world around us seems to be growing ever more secular; the nones – those who subscribe to no religion but claim to be spiritual, most of whom are millennials, are increasing dramatically in number. Theologian Harvey Cox writes with deep insight and a spiritually discerning eye, "God can be just as present in the secular as in the religious realms of life, and we unduly cramp the divine presence by confining it to some specially delineated spiritual or churchly sector."ⁱⁱ

Rather than run from or be fearful of the ebb of religion and the flow of secularism, or of the present profound fracturing of society, perhaps this is a moment when God is trying to get through to us in unexpected and non-traditional ways – we can complain about the crude and offensive campaign this year or look for and listen to the voices and lives of ordinary, disenfranchised people beneath the rhetoric and ambitions of the politicians who are driving it.

Listening and seeing with the eyes and ears of faith turns our hearts and lives into fertile ground; and can turn our congregation into a vehicle of transformation and change and lead us into partnerships with other religious and secular communities and organizations at this critical juncture in the life of our city and region. At a time when Buffalo is resurgent, yet whole communities struggle to survive poverty, illness and violence spiritual discernment that leads to a pathway of healing, reconciliation and justice is needed now more than ever!

It won't happen with a heavenly army descending to do battle with the forces of evil and darkness that are much at work in our world.

Rather it starts maybe by taking someone out to lunch who brings a fresh perspective and listening to what they have to say; or finding a way to establish a relationship with someone outside the orbit of our comfortable middle class friends, colleagues and family; or by reading a book like William Barber's *The Third Reconstruction* envisioning peace with justice in America.

Then, after those attempts to look around us and at ourselves with fresh eyes the promise is when we look again at our leprous lives and relationships,

we will see that healing has begun and recognize the possibility for new life; then run, says the Gospel, to a quiet place, fall on your knees and thank God. Amen.

ⁱ William Barber II, "Why We Are Protesting," *The New York Times*, 9.24.16, A24.

ⁱⁱ Harvey Cox, "The Secular City Twenty-five Years Later," *Religion-online.org*.