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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Thanksgiving Eve
November 25, 2020

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

So, Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I will be the first admit that I am not a good dancer.

It probably has something to do with trying to do too many things at one time—listening to the rhythm in the music, counting, and moving my feet.

Now, I did take dance lessons in college.

And I have to say that I enjoyed square dancing.

I could get into that.

And there were times when I enjoyed the waltz.

Those times when I could hear the rhythm, could count to 3—one, two, three, one, two, three—and get my feet to move accordingly...

When I could put it altogether, it was then that I could fully understand why people love to dance.

Dancing was almost other-worldly.

To be caught up in the music, to move one's body to the rhythm, to be connected to another person, it was really quite a powerful experience.

Now Kathy and I dance on occasion, at family weddings, and the like, but not very often.

And maybe we will take dancing up more when we have more free time. Who knows?

PAUSE

But, I bring up dancing tonight, because it is relevant to our gospel reading.

Indeed, there is a sort of dance going in our gospel, where we see Jesus passing through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

And the gospel then says that Jesus is approached by ten lepers.

And this was not uncommon in antiquity.

It was not uncommon for lepers to travel in groups.

Society had scorned these persons, and so they were forced to live together, their communities provided their only means of socialization.

And they travelled in groups as well for protection. There is safety in numbers after all.

And as Jesus then is passing by the village, where these lepers orbited...

As Jesus is passing by, the lepers approach him.

And there is a sort a dance that happens.

They approach Jesus, but not too close.

They want to get Jesus' attention, but they keep their distance.

They seek healing from Jesus, but they don't dare try to touch Jesus.

And so they yell out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

And Jesus notices them, and he tells them to "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

They are to go to the priests, because it would be the priests who would declare the lepers clean so that they could then re-enter society.

And the gospel text says, that "As they went, they were made clean."

They were healed. Their leprosy miraculously disappeared.

And then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back.

He turned back, and he began praising God with a loud voice.

And he prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

And what does Jesus tell him? “Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well.”

PAUSE

Now there is a lot more going on here than what we observe at first glance.

There is a lot more going on here in this lesson than a quaint story about a man who is healed and who gives thanks.

There is a lot more going on here, but we need to understand something about the culture of that time.

Indeed, there is a lot more going on here, for there is actually dancing going on.

Now, we may not have noticed the dancing.

After all, the passage doesn't say that anyone is dancing.

But it is possible that the lepers were dancing for joy when they discovered they were healed.

It is possible that the one leper who returns to Jesus was leaping and skipping and dancing as he was praising God.

But there is another kind of dancing going on in this passage.

There is the dance of grace.

You see, Friends, in the Roman empire at this time, society was structure around the client-patron relationship.

Clients were persons, who were NOT well off, who often needed help to survive from day to day, and who then attached themselves to a patron, who was any wealthy and powerful person in Roman society.

And a patron would provide then for their clients.

That provision was understood as “charis,” a Greek word meaning “gift,” the Greek word we often translate in English as “grace.”

A patron provided charis, provided grace to their client.

And our modern word “charity” comes from this Greek word “charis” meaning grace.

And, the client's response to the patron's grace was gratitude.

Grace and gratitude share actually the same Latin root.

But in Greek the word for "gratitude" or "thanksgiving" is "eucharist," which appears in our gospel reading.

Eucharist also contains the word charis.

PAUSE

So our gospel reading in effect says the leper is healed.

In effect, the leper received God's grace, God's "charis."

And what does the healed man then do but give thanks to God, he shows eucharist, he shows grace in return.

In other words, grace begets grace in this passage.

And that was how Roman society was meant to function—it functioned upon this concept of reciprocity, of grace begetting grace.

Grace offered and grace received, and grace offered again and grace received.

A client might receive grace from a patron, and then offers grace to the patron in the way of thanks.

But a client could also be a patron to someone else and so then offers grace to their client, who then returned grace in the form of thanksgiving.

In sum, Roman society was a dance, or at least that was the idea.

In fact, there are depictions in marble statues from ancient Rome of the Three Graces.

The three graces were women, gods actually, who are depicted in art as linked together and they are dancing, dancing in a circle.

Again, this was the idealized vision of Roman society, where there is a dance of grace between clients and patrons.

PAUSE

And interestingly enough, how a person, a client would show their thanks to a wealthy, powerful patron, especially a wealthy powerful patron they couldn't possibly hope to pay back...

How a client would show their thanks is by proclaiming loudly the goodness of the patron.

A client would honor their patron with public acclamation, and that same client would all but worship their patron.

Hmmm. Sounds an awful lot like what happens in our gospel reading, doesn't it?

We read again these words from our gospel: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice."

And he prostrated himself at Jesus' feet, which if we didn't know was a sign of worship.

This scene here in our gospel is one between client (the healed man) and patron (the Son of God).

And if we weren't absolutely sure of what is going on between client and patron in this story.

The conclusion says that Jesus tells the leper to "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

A better translation is actually "Your faith has saved you."

And again, within the client-patron relationship, which was a relationship based on the faithfulness of both client and patron, within such a relationship the patron could often be seen as a savior.

So, yes, this gospel is ripe with the client-patron relationship, this gospel is ripe with the dance of grace.

PAUSE

And, I wonder...

Yes, I can't help but wonder...

If the early Christian church took dance lessons from Roman society.

It seems to be the case, in our gospel reading today.

It seems to be the case that the early Church certainly understood God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ as the paramount patrons.

And we Christians are the clients.

We are the ones who are the beneficiaries of God's amazing grace.

And we are called to declare the goodness of God boldly and loudly.

We are called to fall at Jesus' feet and worship, as we do this evening, and every time we gather.

We are called to be faithful, to honor God with our lives, lives that give praise to him in our very being.

We are called to be grateful, to show thanksgiving, to offer grace in return for God's grace given to us.

We are called to link arms with God and neighbor, and we are to dance.

Foxtrot, waltz, tango, whatever your style, but let it be full of grace.

God gives us his grace, every day, every hour of every day.

And God saves us, you and me, not just in his Son by the power of cross and resurrection.

No, God saves us, rescues us, delivers us from the many enemies that seek our harm at any given moment.

Whether we are talking the enemy named starvation, or thirst, or disease, or despair, or grief, or loneliness, or pain, or anxiety, or helplessness, or cold, or doubt...

Yes, there are many enemies from which God saves us, too many to name.

God saves us, just as God saved that man who was healed of his leprosy.

PAUSE

Interestingly enough, notice the man was healed already, when he returned to Jesus.

So what did Jesus mean when he said, "Your faith has saved you."

It was not leprosy then that God saved him from.

No, I submit that the man was saved from the possibility of ingratitude, which the other nine lepers unfortunately embraced.

Indeed, in Roman society, ingratitude was terribly frowned upon.

So this man was saved from that.

Saved from ingratitude.

He is saved from sitting on the sidelines and not participating in the dance of grace.

He is saved so that he might not only show grace in terms of thanksgiving toward God, but also might show grace toward others, who need grace themselves in their lives.

This is the vision of the Christian faith.

It is the dance of grace.

It is a dance the early church learned from the Roman world.

Yes, the church got dance lessons very early on.

And it is this same dance our Lord is teaching us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.