

“A Steward: One Who Names What God Is Doing”

Luke 17:11-19

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There is a writer whose name escapes me and for whom no amount of Googling has borne fruit, who wrote a fictional account of what became of the nine lepers who failed to return to say ‘thank you’ to their Healer. This author felt that the nine had gotten a bad rap and wanted to liberate them from the negative press they have suffered all these years.

As I recall from his book, one of the lepers-made-clean was so thrilled to be rid of his stigma that he literally kicked up his heels and ran into the biggest crowd he could find just to drink in the joy of being shunned no longer! I can hear him shouting out loud, “I’m clean! I’m clean!” He didn’t return to say ‘thank you’ because he was overcome with joy!

Another of the nine broke an Olympic record in his 400 meter dash to see his aging grandmother – the woman he loved most in the world – the person his quarantined status had robbed him from seeing – a 400 meter dash to get to her front door and to embrace her before it was too late to tell her how much he loved her! I can hear him shouting, “I love you! I love you!” You get the drift of the book! Each chapter is like that!

All nine were caught up in their rejoicing! And the author suggests this is really what Jesus would have wanted to see; **even more than being thanked; seeing the transformation of their souls:** sorrow to joy, darkness to light, despair to hope, death to life!

If I had discovered that any of these nine happened to be still around, I'd have them up here in the pulpit with me this morning, inviting us into their rejoicing, sharing with us what God is doing in their lives! Their rejoicing is their stewardship! It's their gift! It's what they have to offer the church!

Anticipating stewardship Sunday next week, I was going to preach a rousing sermon on digging deep and giving generously and supporting the mission of the church sacrificially. Maybe I'll do that next year. But I read the Gospel text assigned for today, and I saw that it is our rejoicing that the church really needs now. I would much rather fall a little short on the budget and go over the top with the rejoicing! I'd rather we go over the top with the naming of what God is doing in our lives! We can scrape by without enough money, but we can't get along with an insufficiency of rejoicing! I know that makes no sense from an accounting point of view! But it makes all the sense in the world from the faith perspective.

When we fill out our pledge cards this week, let's all add a P.S. to the dollar amount. Let's all use the pledge card to name the source of our rejoicing!

Last Sunday evening at about 6:45, I entered the church building through the west doors and I heard the loudest, most exciting chatter ever! As I crossed toward the connector, the enthusiasm grew even louder. It was a volcano erupting, a volcano of middle school energy! I was drawn to it! I wanted to be part of it! I have no clue what they were up to, but I knew they were rejoicing! They were more glad to be in that huddled mass with their peers than Brett Favre is to be in a huddle with the Green Bay Packers. Middle High youth group! It's where lives are transformed!

I am certain, absolutely certain, that not one of them gave a thought to coming over to the senior minister to say thank you for providing such an opportunity, and I am glad they didn't! It was enough to witness their rejoicing!

We also see the rejoicing in quieter ways. Recently, at the memorial service for Donald Ramaker, we heard the most loving tributes children could possibly offer their dad. Though many had come to grieve the death of this dear man, the grown children had come to rejoice; that is, to name how they had encountered the Holy through a father's love. They named it loud and clear! And I sat here, behind the pulpit, getting goose bumps!

We see the rejoicing in the multitude of notes pinned to the bulletin board ear-marked for missions. Each note names a transformation that has occurred because of the partnership with South Church. A Lakota child has gained self-respect. A Malawian orphan has gained access to education. A Cromwell Children's Home resident has a second chance on life. A local resident has found wholeness at the Pastoral Counseling Center. A Hartford Seminary student from Indonesia is hopeful about Christian-Muslim relationships in her homeland. A volunteer operator with the Good Samaritan Suicide Hotline has talked an unemployed man back from the edge. One card in particular just says, "You'll never know. You'll never know." I've come to call this bulletin board 'the rejoicing board'. It's not that everyone is ecstatic; kicking up their heels shouting "I'm clean, I'm clean." It's that people are naming how God is moving in their lives.

If you go to the internet or to the religious catalogues and ask about stewardship materials, you will be swamped by the zillions of strategies for conducting a meaningful campaign. There is a mountain of material out there on all the good things our money accomplishes. But, for me, it all comes down to rejoicing, to naming how God is moving in my life!

If I can't do that, if I have no sense of God's blessing my life, then writing a check to my church is like paying my cell phone bill, just another obligation, just another account payable. But when I begin to name my rejoicing, the check I write to my church becomes a whole new ball game. It becomes that little boy's lunch, you know the lunch I mean, the one Jesus blessed and used to feed five thousand people. When the check I write bubbles up from that place of rejoicing, it becomes a leaven in the loaf.

So, let me tell you about my rejoicing. Last Wednesday, Jim Harriman picked me up at 8:00 a.m. and we drove to Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. We went to be present to his daughter, Marni, and to his one-year-old granddaughter, Collette, who is in Intensive Care awaiting a heart transplant. There was really very little we were able to do. We read some stories. We sat calmly. We shared some chicken soup. We winked and smiled and called out her name, and acted very bravely. And here is what I witnessed. I witnessed a young, first-time mom loving her child with all of her heart. I witnessed a grandfather loving a granddaughter with his whole everything. It was so clear to me that whether Collette lives or dies her life is filled to the brim with love. I tell you God is moving in room eleven on the ninth floor of that hospital. As we waited for the valet parking people to return the car, I just stood there on the curb rejoicing in what I had witnessed. I can't say I was wildly happy, certainly not kicking up my heels, but knowing that God is moving in the lives of this dear family.

In the Confirmation class, we are struggling right now with the idea of believing without the benefit of seeing. I have not one single fact to prove to the class that God is moving in that hospital room, yet I know it is true. It is the source of my rejoicing. And it is my rejoicing that becomes my gift to my church. My rejoicing is my best stewardship. This is really what I wanted to say to the church this morning, in the greatest of hope. Amen!