

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost 21

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

The Venerable Bede writes about Caedmon who is reputed to be the first English poet. Caedmon was an illiterate who wondered how he could praise God. The response to his wondering was to sing of creation, sing of the goodness of God, sing of God's generosity. And so Caedmon the illiterate sang of God's goodness and generosity. The fact that he was illiterate did not impede his desire to sing, and so should nothing prevent us from singing the generosity of God. In fact, we don't need to be educated, nor should we have a perfect voice or be eloquent. As a matter of fact we do not even need a reason to sing of God's generosity, we sing because there is a poet in each of us. And the poet in us always, always rises beyond itself even to the point of saying the unsayable. For the task of the poet and in fact our task is to offer healing, renewal and solace to even those who hold us in bondage.

There was a little girl who was captured in Israel by the Arameans and taken on a long journey to a foreign land. She lived her days serving Naaman's household. In a sense, this little girl was being held against her will and from her family. But her predicament did not stop her from wondering about her master Naaman, her station in life did not stop her from caring for her master Naaman. She was likely aware of the shame, isolation and the enormous burden that Naaman carried with him. Considering the status of her own life, and her place in Naaman's household, she didn't have to do anything. She could simply have watched Naaman suffer under the burden of his leprosy. But some way, somehow, she knew that the generosity of the God of Israel is deeply offensive. It is offensive in the sense that it is not only far-reaching, but it touches those we deem unfit to benefit from that generosity. For this God's generosity does not sample between human categories, it touches the saint and the sinner, and reaches out to the Jew and even Naaman the Aramean.

You know, the poet in this little girl only saw the possibilities of life, she only saw a master living life to the fullest. She ponders over the burden of her master, she thinks about the disease everyone knows but no one dares to talk about. She cared about her master so much so that the poet in her dared to say the unsayable-if only my master knew of the prophet in Samaria.

The prophet in Samaria could not believe that the king was beside himself over the letter concerning Naaman. Elisha could not justify the king's anger. Because he knew one thing that the psalmist also knew, that the Lord is gracious and full of compassion, but even more than that he knew that the compassion and generosity of the God of Israel was offensive enough to offer healing to Naaman the Aramean who had been tormenting the people of Israel.

The idea of God's unbridled generosity is intensified in the gospel story where we hear ten lepers cry out to Jesus as he walked into Jerusalem. It is likely that for reasons of their disease, these men were ostracized from their community. Their cry does not only tell of the human longing for healing and restoration, but it also expresses the desire for wholeness. See, the poet in each of us, does not only say the unsayable, but it tells the story of human longing.

We long for community, we long for affirmation, we long for wholeness, we long for a space that offers solace, hope and renewal, we long for a fulfilling life, we long for a community where we truly can belong, we long for new life; a life full of meaning and purpose. The poet that tells the story of human longing for God equally tells the story of God's longing for humanity with the assurance that God never abandons us. A Jesuit by the name James Martin wrote that "In our deepest longings we hear echoes of God's longing for us. And the more we can follow these deep-down desires, those that God places within us for our happiness, the more joyful we will find ourselves."

There is a story of a man who lost his job and lost his family. Over time he run out of money as he kept searching for a new job. He began selling his possessions one after the other until he was left with a shirt and a pair of pants. He will wash his shirt and pants when he returns home in the evening so he could wear them the next morning. He did not lose hope, he went out searching until one day luck smiled at him and he found a job. He wore the same shirt and pants until he was able to buy new ones. And when he got new ones, he washed the old shirt and pants, folded them and put them by his bed. Each morning when the company bus pulled up in front of his house to pick him for work, he will run back inside the house and then run back out. This kept going on for some time until one of his colleagues asked him why he always waited for the bus to pull up in front of his house before he run back home?

This man narrated his story to his colleague, and then went on to add that, I run back home to look at my old shirt and pants because I do not want to be in that position again. My old shirt and pants remind me of a life I once lived, but they also remind me of how thankful I am, motivate me to live a life of gratitude and spur me on to work as hard as I can because I do not want to live that life again. See, the poet in us tells the human story in a way that offers an alternative to the life that is, to a life that can be, a life pregnant with possibilities and hope.

Naaman longed for that new life and so he traveled from afar to the hut of a prophet. He found the prophet's suggestion too ridiculous and infuriating. But he could not resist the voice of the poet which called him to himself. If you would have had no problem with a difficult task, why do you have a problem with an easy task? The ten who cried out to Jesus were simply asked to go and see the priest-what an easy task in return for healing. But it was only one-the Samaritan, the one who affirms for us the offensiveness of God's generosity, it is he who found a reason to go back and express gratitude.

See, the poet in each of us can tell when life is transformed, the poet in each can tell when our longing ceases and joy takes over our lives. Naaman returned to the prophet in gratitude. One of the ten also returned to Jesus in gratitude. When the poet within us feels the transformation of life, he or she sings with indescribable joy like the Samaritan leper. Karl Barth once said that "Joy is the simplest form of gratitude."

But gratitude is often considered the most difficult of human expressions. This is because it demystifies our sense of self-reliance or any splendor of feeling independent. The gospel does not reveal to us why the nine did not return to offer thanks but we sure know that a grateful heart always seeks to commune with the Ultimate Giver because that heart is always filled with immense joy.

God's love manifest itself in liberating us from all that which dehumanizes us, the love of the liberated is the calling to mind of their liberation and their new life in freedom. If the love of God is compassion, then the love of the liberated is joy, the kind of joy which leads us to prostrate in worship like the Samaritan leper.

The poet in us does not give up. I learned many years ago that you only give up when you don't have anything to give. But when you have something to give, something to offer, you do not give up. Through feast and famine you stuck by St. Paul's.

You blessed this community of faith with a kind of generosity that speaks volumes about the depth of your gratitude. You did not give up on St. Paul's because you knew that giving up diminishes any potential for renewal, growth, transformation, healing, new life and the pursuit of your vision for this place. You have not given up on this mission of God's kingdom in Chestnut Hill.

See, no one plants a tree for themselves. When you plant a tree, you plant it for your children and generations thereafter. That is why during this stewardship season, I humbly bid you to let the poet in you plant a tree, plant a tree for the sake of the many children who fill this holy space with cheerful noise. Plant a tree for the sake of the many children who come here to learn how to live grateful lives. Plant a tree for the many souls who rely on St. Paul's for solace, food and shelter. I bid you to plant a tree with gratitude like that of the Samaritan.

Above all else, I bid you to sing, unleash the poet in you to sing, sing of God's goodness, sing of the beauty of God's creation, sing of God's compassion, sing of God's generosity, sing of God's healing, sing of God's provision. Sing my friend, sing, for that may be the only voice you may have. Amen.