

Who Would Have Thought....

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

Luke 17:11-19

II Timothy 2:8-15

October 10, 2004

When Mom and I moved from South Carolina to Hemet, she knew almost no one. All her friends and relatives were in South Carolina. South Carolina was home. At age 86, she had to start over, go to a new church, make new friends. I'm sure she felt like an exile.

I imagine all of you have had this feeling. Students feel it in their classrooms; sometimes they feel it acutely because of one teacher. Perhaps you are caught in a job, or have a boss who made you feel this way. Perhaps, like Mom you moved to a different city, or perhaps you were caught in an unhappy marriage, or had a debilitating illness. At one time or another all of us have felt like exiles, or like outsiders.

All three of our texts today are about different kinds of exile. Jeremiah was writing to the Jews who were in exile in Babylonian. Paul was in prison. The 10 lepers were exiled from their communities because of their disease.

What do we do when we're in this situation? Well, if we have faith, or if we are desperate, we pray for help. So these ten lepers in the gospel lesson with both desperation and hope called out to Jesus for healing. And Jesus responded to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

Jesus' response was surprising, because the lepers were strictly forbidden to make any contact with the rest of society. But Jesus was in fact asking them to have faith, to believe in their healing even before it had been accomplished. Jewish law required that after a healing the healed person was obligated to go and present himself or herself to the priest to receive a blessing and be admitted back into society. So Jesus was asking them to start the journey to the priest before their healing had taken place.

We know that they were people who had faith, because they began that journey. And as they walked, they believed, and they were healed, carrying with them Jesus' power which they had received from their

encounter with him.

One of them came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Who would have thought that the one who came back would be the Samaritan?

Jesus immediately wanted to know where the other nine who had been healed were. Was only this foreigner responsible enough to return and give thanks for his healing? Why hadn't the others returned?

We will never know for certain why they didn't return. But it may be that they were simply overcome with joy; that they ran to see their families and friends, to see people and to do things they hadn't been able to do in a number of years. Swept up in this new freedom, maybe they simply forgot and their gratitude was overcome by their joy.

Or maybe some of them were even bitter about the healing. Instead of being thankful for what had been given, they were bitter about what had been lost for all of those years. Maybe they thought they should have been healed sooner. Or maybe their healed status made them ask all the more strongly, "Why me? Why does leprosy have to be, and why did it have to claim me?" So perhaps their freedom gave them new eyes to see not only what was ahead, but what had been missed for a long time. Perhaps their gratitude was overcome by bitterness.

Jesus' last words to the one who came back were, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well a better translation is your faith has saved you." He was pronouncing that the healing was now complete, and also that this man's faith was complete: Faith without gratitude is incomplete faith.

But we may say, If I were one of those lepers, I'd be grateful. But would we be? Do we look at, do we focus on, what we have, or do we look at what we've missed, or lost?

Consider another story by Joyce Hollyday:

TWELVE YEARS AGO, on an October afternoon, I was on a bus heading from Lewiston, Maine, where I went to college, to Boston, where I was going to catch a plane to Pennsylvania to my grandfather's funeral.

I remember very sharply the feelings of grief and loss I was experiencing; my grandfather's death was the first major loss in my life. I was feeling very alone, which wasn't difficult, because there were only three other people on that bus. And I was feeling very sorry for myself on that long, three-hour bus ride.

The bus stopped about an hour outside of Boston, and a woman got on — a woman I will never forget. She was in her 70s, and she had a shock of bright, white hair, on top of which sat a red, knit stocking cap. She looked around the bus and saw 38 empty seats, then came right over to where I was sitting and sat next to me. She plopped herself down and said, "Praise God — what a beautiful day!"

Well, it was objectively true that it was a beautiful day. It was one of those New England kind of days that everybody calls "crisp," when the sky is very blue and the air is a little bit chilly, the sun is bright and the leaves in the trees are starting to turn beautiful colors. But I was rather resentful of the fact that she was enjoying the beauty of the day and I felt unable to. So I smiled rather weakly at her.

After a few moments, she looked right at me and said, "So, what's wrong with you?" And I decided I would tell her exactly what was wrong with me, and certainly she would be overflowing with sympathy for my plight. So I explained to her that I was on my way to a funeral, and I was feeling a great deal of loss.

She seemed to show absolutely no sympathy. Finally, after a few minutes, she said, "Well, tell me about your grandfather."

I was very glad for the opportunity, because I figured that if I could prove to her that this wasn't just a run-of-the-mill grandfather but my favorite-person-on-earth grandfather, then indeed she would understand why it was that I was so discouraged. So I started to talk to her about him — about the long walks we used to take and how he

more than anyone else in my life had instilled in me a sense of love and appreciation for creation. Especially for sunsets, because that's very often when we took our walks.

I talked for quite a while about what a wonderful person my grandfather had been, and after a few moments she looked at me and said, "How good of God to have given such a grandfather to you!"

I was very touched by her response. And I think that simply encountering her on that bus transformed me and changed my attitude as to how I went home to deal with the funeral and the grieving that my family was going through. Mrs. Sarah Libby, the dear old woman on the bus, is someone who taught me a great deal about gratitude...

This gospel lesson [is] about healing, to be sure, and it's about faith; but most of all it's about gratitude.

Like the Samaritan leper, we can remember our healing and release and be grateful. But can we, like Joyce, remember what has been lost to us and be grateful for it? How do we respond when it seems that we must remain in exile?

One thing we can do is learn from Paul. He was able to look at the larger picture. "I am in chains," he said, "but the gospel is not in chains." Can we "reframe" our vision, and see the larger picture?

Another thing we can do is try to find God's words to us in our situation. They may surprise us. Jeremiah wrote his words to a group of sad, homesick exiles. In 597 the Babylonians had taken Judah's king, and many of her most prominent and skilled citizens and carried them away into exile. It's ironic that our own country's soldiers are walking that same land now, far from home and feeling like exiles. It's ironic that the people of Iraq, finding their country devastated by war and terrorism probably feel like exiles, too.

What did Jeremiah tell these Babylonian exiles? What were they to do in that strange land? You would have thought he might have said, "Keep your bags packed. God will bring you home soon." or "Resist as much as

you can. Sabotage what you can. Make them sorry they ever captured you.” But that’s not what Jeremiah said. Who would have thought he’d say, “Settle in for the long haul.” But he did! He said, “Build houses and plant crops and have children. God’s going to save you, but it will be a long time from now.” In other words, Jeremiah was telling them to make peace with their situation, to find peace in their situation. But he went even further. He said, “Pray for your captors. Seek the peace and prosperity of the place you’re in.” How apt these words are for our day--for this peacemaking Sunday. We can wish all the Iraqis and the terrorists would listen to them. And they apply to us, as well. One thing we can agree on, whether we are Republican or Democrat--we need to pray for the peace and prosperity of Iraq. Our peace is tied to their peace. Only when they have peace can our soldiers come home.

Who would have thought God would tell the Jews to pray for Babylon? Not ordinary humans. Only God would have this wider view, this broader perspective. Only God would anticipate Jesus’s command to love and pray for ones enemies. How can Jeremiah expect them to do that?

I think the answer comes from two sources--from trust and from gratitude. If the exiles can trust that God is present and has a plan for them, they won’t feel like victims and can pray for their enemies. If they can find something to be grateful for (perhaps their families and these homes they are to build and their crops) then they won’t be resentful and they can seek the prosperity of their captors.

Who would have thought that Paul, in prison, would write: “I have learned in whatever state I am to be content?”

How can we learn to be like this? Yvonne Dilling, a U.S. church worker who spent two years with Salvadorian refugees in Honduras, tells a story that will help us. Listen to the story:

As soon as the refugees began to make a new camp, they set up three committees. There was the committee of education and the committee of construction. And there was the *comité de alegría*, the "committee of joy."

Celebration was as basic to the life of the refugees as teaching their children to read or building a latrine. One refugee woman once asked me why I was so serious all the time, why she walked around looking so burdened

down. I talked about the tremendous suffering of the people, the grief that she felt every day, and her commitment to give all of herself to the struggle of the refugees. And this woman looked at her and just said, "You're not serious about our struggle. Only people who expect to go back to North America in a year work the way you do. You cannot be serious about the struggle unless you play and celebrate and do those things that make it possible to give a lifetime to it.

You cannot be serious about the struggle unless you celebrate--unless you have things to be thankful for that you can celebrate.

Brothers and sisters, whenever we feel like exiles, whenever we feel like outsiders, let's remember to trust the God who made us and loves us, who sent Jesus to live in exile among us. Let's remember to be grateful and celebrate the gifts we have.

Amen