

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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XVIII Pentecost, Luke 17:11-19

O God of every nation,
of every race and land,
redeem the whole creation
with your almighty hand;
where hate and fear divide us
and bitter threats are hurled,
in love and mercy guide us
and heal our strife-torn world.ⁱ

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

In the years since her yellow-and-blue spined *The Happiness Project* became a 2009, *New York Times* #1 bestseller, Gretchen Rubin’s work has generated a twenty-first-century content ecosystem: a blog and a podcast, more books and a column in Oprah’s magazine, online courses and a smart-device program crisply titled, “The Happier App.” Practicing what she preaches, Rubin writes and speaks with an approachable, good humor – at times a little saccharine for me, but, given the positivity of her material, I harshly judge my judgements of her; I assume my annoyance is *my* issue, my failure to have abided the good habits of the “personal happiness toolkit” she has so generously encouraged me to take up.ⁱⁱ

Referencing the work of Harvard oracle Tal Ben-Shahar, Rubin writes of the *arrival fallacy* ... “‘the arrival fallacy,’ [that misguided] belief that when you arrive at a certain destination, you’ll [finally] be happy.” That is, “we often imagine that we’ll be happy as soon as we get a job/make partner/receive tenure/get married/have a baby/[elect a Democratic congress/retire/make a] move,”ⁱⁱⁱ whatever we have identified as The Next Essential Thing. However, the “arrival fallacy [proves] a fallacy because [our] arriving rarely makes [us] as happy as [we] expect.”^{iv}

Rubin explains this phenomenon: “by the time [we’ve] arrived at [our] destination, [we’re already] expecting to reach it, [and we] quickly become adjusted [to the happiness levels of our post-destination] state of affairs ... [Indeed], working *toward* a goal can be a more powerful source of happiness than hitting it – which can [leave our achievements feeling like] letdown[s]. It’s important, therefore, to look for happiness in the present moment[, in the growth atmosphere that creates what psychologists mark as ‘pre-goal attainment positive affect’].”^v

Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest Dean, Diocese of Massachusetts alum, and friend of Trinity Church, the Very Rev. Dr. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge identifies our related tendency during crises “to postpone our expectations” – to imagine ourselves as between two points of meaning, rather than recognizing our immediate situation as meaningful.^{vi} As antidote, Kittredge appeals to “the Christian sacrament of the present moment,” resonating with Rubin’s reminders to “enjoy the present [and not] count on the happiness that is – or isn’t – waiting [in] in the future. The fun part doesn’t come later, *now* is the fun part,” and we must make it so. Or, to Kittredge’s more expansive point, the moment of consequence is not in the future, the consequential moment has already arrived, is here, for God is with us in the *now*. And what we do with this moment makes a difference, both for ourselves and for the world around us.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus walks the border of his native Galilee in Israel and the neighboring territory of Samaria.^{vii} This setting – along the line dividing two nations, at a city gate between the comfortable and the uncertain – reinforces Jesus’ priority for those at the edges of “civilization,” those who live outside the established community, yet not beyond God’s grace.

As Jesus approaches this border town, ten lepers cry out to him, “saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’”^{viii}

By law, those with leprosy lived outside the camp,^{ix} and, according to Levitical instruction, those with “the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of [their] head[s] be disheveled; and [they] shall cover [their] upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’”^x to warn away anyone who neared. The text’s note, “keeping their distance,” witnesses these lepers’ abiding this social-legal expectation.^{xi}

When Jesus sees the lepers, he says “to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’”^{xii}

Before being reincorporated into the community, the ritually unclean customarily had to receive the certification of a religious leader to pronounce their curing complete and to begin the process of readmission into the temple fellowship. However, here in Luke’s story, “*as [the lepers] went, they were cleansed*” – before any other step, they are made clean.^{xiii} Their loyal acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord, their humble cry for mercy, their willing fulfillment of Jesus’s commission – these in-the-moment fidelities heal them without delay or deferment, heal them *before* the future pronouncement of any authority.

One of these lepers, “seeing that he was healed, turn[s] back, praise[s] God with a loud voice, and [falls] on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving [thanks].”^{xiv} Here, the distances of their initial meeting – the leper lobbing his plea to the Lord – now give way to intimacy. Like the woman of Chapter 7 who bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears and dried them with her hair,^{xv} the healed man lays himself before Jesus and gives thanks to God.

Jesus then inquires of the other nine lepers who were healed: “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this one, a Samaritan?”^{xvi}

While sharpened with disappointment at the nine's spiritual myopia, Jesus' questions do not indicate that the other sufferers have had their healings revoked. Jesus neither curses them nor commands them back out beyond the city walls. Rather, he refocuses on the Samaritan who *has* returned, affirming this one and explaining, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you **well**."^{xvii} The Samaritan's gratitude delivers him into the "Christian sacrament of the present moment" where God is, for more than physical health alone, the Samaritan's thanksgiving binds him to the active, vital ministry of Christ and makes him *well*.

See, this encounter between Jesus and the lepers does not draw tragedy along the tidy lines separating unclean and clean, diseased and healed, but on those murkier borders between the constant and the inconsistent, the present and the distracted – that hazy territory where all of us "live, move, and have our being."^{xviii} Related, God does not condemn the nine lepers from some high and lofty judgement seat; rather, the nine lepers *choose* their distance from Christ – a tragic and unnecessary "punishment" they elect for themselves by going it alone.

Jesus invites the lepers to participate in eternal life – not a future state of being across another, distant threshold – but that ever-present opportunity to join in the joys and hopes of God in Christ. All that the healed need do to experience the fulfillment for which they have ached their whole lives – to experience *wellness* and the nearness of the Lord – is to recognize their dependence upon God and one another, to join together, and to give thanks. And that same offer remains before us.

Today we gather as friends of the Ukrainian people, to stand together and to support one another. Indeed, we gather as neighbors of every global citizen, beholding the unholy madness and suffering of war, to hear in our native tongues, to sing in a common voice. We gather to resist all those "arrival fallacies" the world whispers to us: that violence today, will create Peace tomorrow [a lie]; that going it alone now, will ready us for partnerships later [a lie]; that the ravages of a faraway conflict do not concern or impact us here [a lie].

Instead, we encounter one another with grace and gratitude, appreciating that the suffering of any one, any where diminishes the wellness of all. Acknowledging that God has knit together the wellness of Ukraine and Russia, the United States and all the world, we recognize the sacramental power of this present moment, and we appreciate that the hope of any one, any where increases the hopefulness and wellness of all. Refusing to postpone our expectations, we not only pray for a future Peace, we gather to join in that Peace here, now – today and not later. With love and hope – "on our lips and in our lives"^{xix} – we participate in the joys and hopes of God in Christ, and we labor to end all wars, forever.

Keep bright in us the vision of days when war shall cease,
when hatred and division give way to love and peace,
till dawns the morning glorious when truth and justice reign
and Christ shall rule victorious o'er all the world's domain.^{xx}

With gladness and singleness of heart, I pray,
Amen.

ⁱ Reid Jr, William Watkins. “O God of every nation,” from *The Hymnal 1982*, Hymn #607. The first verse of the hymn we sang before today’s Gospel reading.

ⁱⁱ Perhaps the self-perpetuating genius of her work.

ⁱⁱⁱ Or, as a parishioner pointed out to me as so obvious during these pandemic years, “As soon as we have vaccine/achieve herd immunity/etc.”

^{iv} Rubin, Gretchen. “[Happiness Myth No. 8: You’ll Be Happy As Soon As ...](#)” I draw all these quotes from Rubin’s March 11, 2009, “The Happiness Project” blog entry, as also featured in her book.

^v Ibid. The distance between the common sense of “pre-goal attainment positive affect” and its ridiculously clinical name duly noted and laughed, the principle is so dang true, of course. As much as I love listening to a new Compact Disc (yes, I still buy CDs), I love the process of finding a new band that sounds interesting, flipping through [click-click-click-click] the used CD shelves of my local record store, having my heart leap a little at finding the \$3.99 of happiness I set off to hunt, reading the liner notes, checking out the Rolling Stone review from the time of its release, ripping it into my iTunes library, listening to it track-by-track, filing the jewel case in my music library, rediscovering it some time later ... so much fun.

^{vi} Dean Kittredge spoke of Rubin in the “Dean’s Remarks” during a recent Seminary of the Southwest Board meeting. Further to these ideas, she references Brother Lawrence’s 17th century reflection, *The Practice of The Presence of God*.

^{vii} Luke 17:11. “On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” In his New Interpreters Bible commentary on Luke, R. Alan Culpepper notes: “Verse 11 has [led] commentators to observe that Luke seems to have only a vague gasp of Palestinian geography. Traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus would have been traveling from north to south. Strictly speaking, there was no “region between Samaria and Galilee.” Since Galilee lay above Samaria, Jesus may have traveled near the border between the two regions as he made his way down to the Jordan to skirt around Samaria, as most Jewish travelers did. This geographical note, however vague it is, serves to establish Jesus proximity to Samaria and hence a setting in which he might meet the Samaritan leper featured in the story.”

^{viii} Luke 17:13.

^{ix} Numbers 5:2-3, as referenced by Culpepper: “Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse; you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp ...”

^x Leviticus 13:45-46.

^{xi} Luke 17:12.

^{xii} Luke 17:14a.

^{xiii} Luke 17:14b.

^{xiv} Luke 17:15-16.

^{xv} Luke 7:36-50. Through verse 38: “One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisees house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet wither tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.”

^{xvi} Luke 17:17-18.

^{xvii} Luke 17:19.

^{xviii} From “The Collect for Guidance” in “Morning Prayer, Rite II,” among other settings in the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979.

^{xix} From “The General Thanksgiving,” also in “Morning Prayer, Rite II,” among other settings.

^{xx} Reid, “O God of every nation.” The last verse of that same hymn we sang before today’s Gospel.