

April 26, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 2 Luke 17:11-19

Dear Friends;

It is hard to believe we are almost at the end of April. But we are. And you may notice I am finally getting the form of this document right. It is a letter...an epistle. I recall my teachers at Knox College reminding us as students that when we became ordained ministers in The Presbyterian Church In Canada, we should remember we were being recognized as apostles, that is, disciples of Jesus being sent out to serve the church. And here I am, imitating my heroes Luke the Gospel writer, and of course Paul, writing a pastoral letter to the believers in Stirling and the wider community that reads these messages and the attached sermon. May God in HIS gracious Son, Jesus, by means of HIS Holy Spirit bless each one of you as you continue to practice social distancing, washing your hands and as much as possible staying in your homes. Barbara and I are well. The Lord has been good to us, as HE always is. We have been pumping water out of the basement at the farmhouse over the last 3 weeks. It appears we may be able to open up on Tuesday of the coming week. We and our dogs, Gambler and Brandi are looking forward to that. For some reason it seems to be easier to socially isolate in the rural landscape of Madoc Township. I continue to pray for you as we work our way through this time when the plague of our generation has made it hard for us to meet face to face. I also pray for you as we, with the larger Canadian family grieve with our brothers and sisters in Nova Scotia over the violence that took the lives of 22 victims and the life of the perpetrator. May

the peace of Jesus be upon you and with you and in you. But you tuned in for a message.

Luke 17 is about 10 individuals who were stricken with the plague of the ancient world, leprosy. This series is about the fact that we are all witnesses to the facts of God's saving grace poured out upon the human family, in the shed blood and broken body of Jesus Christ. HE was crucified. And HE is the risen ONE alive among us, calling us to believe, showing us HIS mercy in the midst of the times in which we are living. If we believe in HIM it is because we have witnessed His love, the power of HIS teaching, HIS unique ability to change lives, HIS ability to heal us when we are sick and injured. HE does this every day, and I find it sad that many do not even notice, or refuse to see what is evident before their very eyes. There were ten victims of the disease (incurable at the time) which should ring some bells concerning our present circumstances with covid-19.

As Luke presents the facts of the story, Jesus was walking to Jerusalem from Galilee. The route and the road took HIM along the border of Samaria. Think Palestinians. The reason I say that is that the Samaritans and the Jews in the time of Jesus got along about as well and as comfortably, as the awkward and often violent relationship between the Palestinians and the Jews in the state of Israel in our time. It is true they did not seem to fall into violent conflict. But there is no question their relationship was like that of oil and water, each distinct from the other, and little respect either way.

It is interesting that 9 of the lepers were Jews and 1 was a Samaritan. Which really boils things down to this: as Jesus walked to Jerusalem and the awaiting death on the cross, HE passed a leper colony. We have heard Dr. Tam tell us that this modern virus does not respect borders of any kind. So it was in the ancient world with leprosy. Jews, Samaritans and any others who had leprosy were thrown together into colonies of disease ridden populations waiting the inevitable death the disease would bring, cut off from family, friends and their former lives and work. Social distancing then as now had to be enforced for the safety of those who were not sick. In a way we never thought about, we are now witnesses to these realities. Dr. Tam has also reminded us social distancing is the ancient way of dealing with incurable disease. Here we are. I am in my home. You are in yours. And we dare not meet for the safety of our faith community, and our community at large.

The ten lepers had another thing in common. They had all heard about Jesus ministry in Galilee. You may recall that Jesus met and talked with a Samaritan woman who had come to a community well to draw water to take home. She ran and told her neighbours she had met a man who told her everything she had ever done. Is that how the Samaritan leper had heard about Jesus? We do not know. The point is these 9 Jews and this 1 Samaritan make common cause in screaming their lungs out, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" This, they shouted from a distance, once again, practicing social

distancing, for they were sick, and Jesus and HIS disciples are not.

Jesus did not undo their caution by approaching them. He saw them. He gave them instructions from a distance. And Jesus made an assumption. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. That is the Old Testament admonition required for re admission to society. The priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, Teachers of the Law, (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) had the sole authority to pronounce them healed, and therefore capable of taking up their “normal lives” once again, meaning their lives from before being sick. This really does resound with themes we are witnessing. Almost daily, there are questions put to Prime Minister Trudeau and Premier Ford, “when will things get back to normal?” God alone knows the future. And so far both of our leaders have basically said, when it is possible. Wise. We are witnessing these facts.

As the ten went to see the priests Luke tells us they were cleansed. They received the very healing they had requested. They could see it. But they are not free to go back to their families or their work, until they have been certified as healed. There are no short cuts. Punishment would take the form of being sent back to the leper colony and therefore the possibility of once again falling ill. They are motivated to see the priests. Here is the kicker in the story Luke tells us. It is the Samaritan and the Samaritan alone who goes back to Jesus to say “thank you.” And in fact the Samaritan does much more

than that. He acts as a man reborn. He acts as a man who is aware God has touched his life, and in fact given him new life, not just his old one. When the Samaritan comes face to face with Jesus what does he do? He throws himself at Jesus feet and expresses his gratitude. He has been making a joyful noise on the way to find Jesus! Praising God loudly!

Jesus asks an embarrassing question. “Where are the other 9? Were not all cleansed? Was no one found to return and praise God but this foreigner?” Do not miss the point. Jesus is scolding Jews for not recognizing their Messiah. He is scolding Israel for not being as concerned about faith and spiritual life as their priests claim they do. It is a Gentile, a person who is not raised in the traditions, the faith and with the Scriptural teaching of the Law and the Prophets who praises God for what has happened in his life and comes to Jesus to say thank you to the author of the grace of God he has experienced. Here too we need to see we are witnesses.

The numbers are staggering. I have watched the numbers climb from the beginning of this international plague. So for a moment lets just look at the Canadian numbers. This morning according to a chart on the Internet, 43,888 cases of covid-19 have been diagnosed. Of those 2,302 Canadians have died. 15,541 have recovered. I find myself wondering how many of the 15,541 have thanked the Lord for their recovery. They are not “lucky.” If nothing else, God has given every one of us the potential to recover from illness and injury. Then there is the special outpouring of grace, amazing

grace, when God heals the sick because there is life to be lived for HIM, and things to be done that the individual is destined to do, contributions to be made.

Here me on this: I am no judge of others. But this virus is a killer. We knew when it broke upon our world and our nation and our province that it had the potential to be twenty times more deadly than the flu which kills approximately one percent of those who catch it during a normal winter's flu season. One percent of the total cases to date in Canada is 439. Five times that number have died. A third of those diagnosed to date have gotten well. Are people thankful or just...relieved? Feeling lucky?

What I see in the numbers is a lot of mercy. A ton of grace. For all that is bad and sad about this pandemic...and this virus over which we have little control, God has once again, blessed Canada and Canadians. He has blessed us with HIS mercy. With every bitter lash and the stripes that Jesus endured we have seen healing of our wounded and sick. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Jesus who healed and heals the sick. Praise the power of the Holy Spirit that we have the medical doctors and nurses we do have who care for those who are sick unto death, many of whom recover, and are recovering. To the grace and mercy of God we can see in these numbers....we are witnesses.

Let us pray;

Thank you Lord once again, for people who stand on the front lines of this war with disease. Thank you for healing mercies which we acknowledge have their source in YOU, and for the workers who tend the sick and fight for their lives in hospitals and ICUs across this country. Thank you for the risks they take in caring for the sick who have a disease as communicable as covid-19 is. Lord forgive our impatience. You have called us to pray and to pray without ceasing. We pray for the end of this pandemic. Save Africans. Save the peoples of South America. Save our American neighbours. Save the peoples of Europe and Asia. YOU, O Lord and YOU alone hold the whole wide world in your hands. Have mercy upon us. Lord save us. To you we offer the praise and thanksgiving that flows from our lips and hearts and souls. Amen