

## **Sermon: Namaste (Greeting, Leaving, Thanksgiving and Welcome)**

### **Written by Rev. Theresa McDonald-Lee**

Namaste. This is the word I heard most frequently when I travelled to Nepal with Presbyterian World Service and Development (PWS&D) staff to visit projects. It is a word of greeting, of leaving, of thanksgiving, and of welcome. Although Hindu in origin, the word is used by people of every religion in Nepal (and throughout the whole Indian subcontinent). It can simply mean, "I bow to you." It can also mean, "The divine in me bows to the divine in you," or "The sacred in me recognizes the sacred in you." "Namaste" is said with hands at prayer position at heart or forehead, and a slight bow is offered as the word is spoken.

Every room entered, every meeting begun, every arrival at a home begins with "Namaste." I am not certain that there is a true English equivalent – it is more thoughtful than "hello", more meaningful than a quick "good morning," more generous than "How are you?" As someone from North America who was new to the practice, it was a beautiful way to begin every interaction. There was great kindness in offering Namaste. The people who were greeting me were strangers and I was a stranger to them, but the first priority was always establishing our common humanity.

Sharing in the practice of greeting with the word "namaste" was one of the most meaningful parts of the journey to Nepal. I expect that people in Nepal don't get as excited about the practice as visitors do. But as an outsider, it was a practice that was noteworthy in its possibility and promise.

John Calvin wrote that we are all engraved with the marks of God's glory. In sharing Namaste, we were taking a moment to glimpse God's glory in each human body, each neighbour, friend, and stranger. We were remembering that each person is fearfully and wonderfully made, a child of God and a beloved sibling in Christ.

When we heard Psalm 139 this morning, we are reminded that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. God knows us inside and out. God hems us in, behind and before, and knows the words on our tongue before they are said. This is true of us, and it is also true of our neighbours.

In offering Namaste, we were allowing our common humanity and our divine spark to bring us together. Before we do or say or offer anything, we are being greeted as sacred.

Before we receive or hear or act, we are extending peace and grace, the same peace and grace that Christ extended to us. One of my most significant moments of Namaste came when I was touring the Shining Hospital in Banke. This is a hospital for patients with leprosy, many who have lived with the disease for many years. A life with leprosy is not easy. It is one of the earliest documented human conditions, and it appears in both the Old and New Testament.

Those who suffered from leprosy in ancient times were considered unclean and often cast out of their families and communities. In fact, the word leper is now often used to mean someone who is a social outcast, rather than someone who has the medical condition.

In our scripture reading today, Jesus heals a man with leprosy. The man makes a bold statement of faith to Jesus, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus replies that he is willing, and replies, "Be made clean!" Being clean means that the man would be able to rejoin his family, have work, participate in the religious life, and become a member of the community again.

This remains the dream and the wish of those who have leprosy today. In the Shining Hospital, we met both young and old, men and women, who also want to rejoin their communities and find life abundant. And that dream is within reach for people with leprosy today. There is now medication that both halts the progression of the disease and the ability to infect others. But the tremendous stigma attached to leprosy means that people are often hesitant to get tested, as they fear rejection and illness.

But at the Shining Hospital, through the work of International Nepal Fellowship, supported by PWS&D and WMS, these patients are receiving exceptional care under very challenging circumstances. Each patient, with great dignity and warmth, greeted the guests from North America with Namaste. In turn, we bowed to them, recognizing the spark of God's glory. In that hospital with few resources, there is great love. And in that great love, there is healing.

There is medicine, there is physical therapy, there is treatment, but most of all, there is the recognition of God's handiwork in every patient. Jesús responded to the man with leprosy by saying, "I am willing." He saw through the disease to the heart of the man in front of him. He recognized the divine spark of God, the same one that is in each person. Jesus did this over and over again, with those considered outcasts and lepers. Jesus would be at home in the hospital room in Shining Hospital, saying over and over again, "I am willing."

The nurses, physicians, physical therapists, cleaners, and health care workers at Shining Hospital are echoing Jesus's words and actions by offering healing and love to those who need it most.

Visit after visit in Nepal began and ended with Namaste. Each bow was an opportunity to return grace with grace; to see God's goodness in others and to extend the same generosity of Spirit back to new friends. The work of Presbyterian partners in Nepal is helping patients with leprosy regain dignity, health, and community. With Jesus, let us say, "I am willing." With our neighbours, friends, and strangers, let us search for the divine spark of God and speak Namaste to one another. Amen.