

So That We May See

By Ridgley Joyner

Luke 17:11-19

Last weekend, I completed a bucket list item of mine—to hike the “Triple Crown” -three trails with breathtaking summits on the Appalachian Trail. I had done the other two over the past year and the final hike awaited me—Tinker Cliffs, 9 miles to one of the best summits of the three. I was very excited about the prospect of completing a goal I made 2 years ago.

As I was preparing for the hike, I found myself flooded with fears and anxiety about my first post COVID hike alone. While this is a well-traveled safe and popular trail for tourists, I had all these ideas in my head of what could go wrong. I was excited for the hike, but there were a lot of “worst case scenarios” running through my mind.

I filled my backpack with plenty of water, snacks, electrolytes, first aid kit, all these things—jacket in case I get too cold, a tshirt in case I get too hot, you name it, I packed it.

As I’m approaching the trailhead I start to think “oh dear, what if I’ve started too late? What if I’m hiking in the dark at the end?” I grab my headlamp and add that too. So with a fully charged phone and a fully charged watch that GPS’s me, I hop out of the car to sling my backpack on to my back and buckle it in place. And then I hear—I see your car magnet, I love Montreat too! I look up and it’s two college students. In chacos (sandals) and shorts. With one water bottle for the two of them. We start a conversation and they share that this was the young man’s second hike ever and his girlfriend who loves this trail is taking him up to see the views. They wish me well and happily move on ahead.

It was then that my hike really started. As I'm walking, I'm discovering just how *heavy* the bag really is—of all the worst-case scenarios I had envisioned...this was the one that I didn't—hiking with too heavy of a bag. Every step I took, every incline I hit, I was filling more and more with regret as to how anxious I had been for a simple hike. I looked up and watched these college kids spring ahead of me, these dads with their 12 year old sons pass me on the trail—enjoying their hike on a beautiful fall day. And I...well I was wheezing and filled with regret.

I finally got to the peak—it was a BEAUTIFUL view- so breathtaking taking in all of the Appalachian mountains and the different shelves. Sitting silently up there in the sunshine eating my snacks taking in the view, I realized that what I was enjoying most about it was the exceptional colors. For all of us who love Fall, we are celebrating a season in which all the leaves are literally dying. We LOVE a season in which we watch the slow decay of leaves and trees shed what they need to shed- to *let go* of their leaves that once brought so much life in the spring and summer. I was relishing watching these trees go through the process of letting go—when I...had spent the day bearing the burden of all that I had taken on.

Here in a season where God's creation is literally showing us how to let go, I was taking on and taking on and taking on with my worries, my worst-case scenarios. I didn't regret my hike that day one bit. What I do regret is how long it took for me to enjoy it. I had not only packed extra stuff, but I was literally carrying the embodiment of my worries on my back and it was weighing me down preventing me from truly experiencing all that there was to see.

The lepers that were healed by Jesus in our scripture reading this morning were carrying many things that were weighting them down. They were contagious, unclean, not allowed places. I'd suspect that a

part of their burdens was the isolation, not being truly seen for who they were- for only being recognized as what they had. They didn't quite belong and lived in an in-between space in society. It is likely the healing they needed was physical, social and psychological.

It is not an accident that the writers of Luke positioned Jesus in this passage in an “in between location”—and it is there that he does not move away from the lepers. Instead, he sees their burdens that were weighing them down—their sickness but also all the baggage that accompanied it. He sees *beyond* their burdens and heals them allowing them to live and see and be free, a life restricted no more. Immediately lifted of their burdens they happily go on their way, being given this fortune, and yet, one turns back. He lays himself at the feet of Jesus thanking him and giving him praise. This gift he was given is returned with worship, gratitude, giving thanks and praise to this Messiah.

Jesus looks down at him and says “your faith has made you well”. The Greek for “made well” here is *sesoken* from the root of *sozo* and can be translated as “made well, saved, healed”. The King James translation says “Your faith has made you whole” and I love that translation because it makes is clear that there is more to this encounter than mere healing of illness.

Yes, his life was free, but the very lifesaving thing in this moment is the grace of God. He recognized it and gave thanks to God. It is so easy to read this as yet another healing story of Jesus’s--But I think it is more than that—I am struck by how their burdens were preventing them from living a different kind of life. The minute that was lifted from them, the first thing this man did was return it with thanksgiving, gratitude. Perhaps it was his gratitude to and recognition of God in his midst was what truly saved this man.

Rev. David Lose writes that “(this passage)...orients us to the possibility that Jesus shows us then and now that faith is not a matter of believing only but also seeing.” All the lepers were healed but one saw and recognized what truly had happened, and that made all the difference for him.

These 8 verses serve a purpose for us this morning—to recognize that what we choose to *see* can make all the difference for us...it just might lead to wholeness.

It is no secret that the past two years have been hard times for us in our country, in our communities, for our health, for our families our jobs, our wallets. Even personally, we’ve been faced with challenges that we never expected. And we just kept throwing them on our backs.

I wonder for you two years in, do you feel like you are carrying a lot on your back? Is it preventing you from seeing God’s grace in your everyday life? Turning each day, a beautiful gift from God, into another day of to do lists and begrudgingly trudging through activities worried sick about every detail? How much of our interactions are laced with fear, anxiety, worry from a greater issue at hand?

It is obvious that what we long for is to live a life free of these burdens. Yet for many of us, thinking in a “worst case scenario” mindset gives you control, avoids the unexpected. What I am struck by in this passage is just how life saving this man’s gratitude to God is. How his focus wasn’t on the burdens--getting healed--his focus was on freedom to give thanks to God.

Lately I have been ever aware of our need to seek control in the midst of feeling powerless. A wise soul once told me that your thoughts shape your reality—and so when we are in cycles of constant fear, worry, or anxiety—

What is next for our church family? How many people are coming? How is the stockmarket? How do we make ends meet this month? How do we grow our business, how do we save our job during layoffs? how do we find the solution that eases our health issues?

That shapes our reality. We begin to see things through that lens. We can choose to see “I’m unlucky, when is my break, haven’t I had enough heartache, one more hard thing, life never calms down, everyone wants something from me.” But these thoughts, they shape our reality. And we carry them on our backs.

What would it look like to focus our thoughts on seeking God’s gifts to us each day, even the small ones, like the colors of the leaves, and giving thanks to God. What it would like for us—to see God in our midst? To make note of those things we are grateful for? A hot cup of tea, the fall colors, reconnecting with an old friend. Maybe even the things we don’t see—like the farmer that grew the vegetables that fill your belly. The warm water in your shower, a moment of laughter in your home. I wonder just how life saving that might be for us—

How would that reshape the way we see the world, the way we are freed from the weight of our burdens? We don’t add “we must be grateful” to our list of to dos or burdens we carry, but rather we free ourselves to be radical enough to see that this life can be beautiful, and that we can seek contentment and freedom in the arms of our Creator. ***It is then that we realize that the world isn’t going to change, but we will.***

That is when we experience the freedom that Jesus offers the lepers and to us—the lifesaving gift of gratitude. Our eyes will be opened to see the world in a totally new light.

My practice this fall has been to be like the trees and let go of the things in my life that aren't serving me, that are burdening me and preventing me from seeing God in my midst.

I have created a “contentment bank” which is a mason jar full of little sheets of paper. I start each day reflecting on the previous day and list 5 things that brought me happiness—interactions with you all, seeing God work through your gifts, an interaction with a stranger at the dog park, the sun setting painting the sky in just the right way that catches my eye, the ability to hike 9 miles! The catch is this—I don’t let myself ever repeat an item. And when my days have felt burdened and heavy, I’ve been able to visit my jar full of things that bring me joy, that I gave thanks to God for and remind myself that I have much to be grateful for despite how it might feel in the moment. Because the world hasn’t changed, but I can choose to. After all, your thoughts shape your reality.

For many of us that is worship. This is where our bank is—when we feel burdened, and we don’t have anything left we know we can come here and pull from our bank. We are reminded of how good God is and how that can free us to move through our lives like this grateful man in scripture today. Not just for one hour on a Sunday morning but to go forth to experience all that God is blessing us with daily. Not to escape the bad things, but to seek contentment—and our joy and happiness is not defined by the things thrown at us, but because we belong to a God who is everywhere all the time. During 16th century reforms, Martin Luther was asked to describe the nature of worship—and his response: the tenth leper turning back.

Our joy is in the lord who gives us each day a new breath, a new gift. So, I encourage you this week to take home this insert in your bulletin and write down five different things each day where you see God-glimpses of God’s grace and the gifts that God gives us. Jesus said

“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

May it be so with us. Amen.