

## Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost – Dav Timm

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; Psalm 111; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

In our contemporary society, the word “faith” has taken on a number of definitions, and in pop culture specifically, the word “faith” could refer to George Michel’s #1 song from 1988, or to the early American hardcore punk band “The Faith,” or even the eighth episode of the fourth season of the reimagined Battlestar Galactica. On the other hand, the familiar verse Hebrews 11:1 reminds us, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” For our purposes this morning, we’ll stick with the latter definition. The scripture texts we read provide us with plenty of material for a discussion of a life of faith.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Jeremiah writes a letter to the Jews who had been sent into exile in Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar. Though they were enslaved by a pagan nation, Jeremiah instructed them to continue living their lives faithfully by expanding their numbers, and by seeking peace and prosperity. If the captives merely waited in anticipation of returning to Jerusalem, they would possibly be overcome with discouragement and might dwindle away altogether.

Jeremiah’s hope for the Israelites is that they would honor God in the land where they were exiled by increasing in wealth and number, despite the presence of false prophets among them and foreign rulers reigning over them. Jeremiah instructed the Israelites to seek the welfare of the city in which they found themselves, for only in its welfare would they themselves prosper. Babylon had become their new home, whether they liked it or not, and they could not go on living in rebellion against the land in which they lived, for that would not only deny the fact that their prosperity was dependent on the welfare of Babylon, but it would also contradict their moral principles.

The Psalmist echoes some of the same themes that Jeremiah’s letter highlighted. The point is to give God praise for his faithfulness throughout history. God will deliver us out of exile, just as he did when he brought the Israelites out of Egypt, parting the Red Sea for them to walk across. This is not to say that there will be no trials – indeed, God tested them many times, even letting enemies ride over their heads! – but he will bring us out into a spacious place.

It is worth mentioning that the Psalm invites the whole earth to make a joyful noise, suggesting that all nations, Jew and Gentile, receive the blessings of God. Just as the Israelites were tested during their period of exile, so do we all experience trials that, if we remain faithful, ultimately bring us to a deeper wisdom, a newfound joy and peace.

Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy while in prison in Rome. Paul knew he probably did not have much longer to live, and he wrote to Timothy to give final instructions and encouragement, passing the torch of church leadership to his beloved follower and friend.

Right off the bat, Paul emphasizes the significance of Jesus' humanity and divinity – Remember Jesus Christ, a descendent of David who was raised from the dead. He knew that false teachers were becoming a problem in the church at Ephesus, and this statement served as a reminder of the foundation and truth of the gospel. Like the Israelites who suffered the hardship of exile in Babylon, Paul too had encountered widespread opposition and persecution as a result of his Christian discipleship, even now landing him in prison. Timothy would surely encounter trials in his lifetime as well.

But alas, the Word of God is not bound by chains – Paul's letter is evidence of that. Even though Paul was imprisoned in Rome, his message of the gospel reached beyond his cell walls to circulate with freedom. Therefore, we should not be too concerned with our present condition, even if we are facing enormous hardship or deprivation, for the Word of God will be triumphant, and this holds more importance than what happens to us.

Paul then offers an encouraging message, perhaps an early Christian hymn, as a trustworthy reference by which to live one's life. He instructs Timothy to spread the word to other Christians, urging them to endure their present burdens and to avoid quarreling over unimportant details which only lead to ruin. Instead, Paul says, do your best to present yourself before God as one approved by him with no need to be ashamed.

These scripture passages bear consequence in light of today's gospel reading as well. As we read, Jesus was on the road between Jerusalem and Galilee when he encountered a group of ten lepers on the outskirts of a village. The lepers initially kept their distance, observing the Mosaic Law that required people with leprosy to separate themselves from those in good health because they were considered unclean. They raised their voices to Jesus, asking for mercy, or as some translations interpret it, pity. Without hesitation, Jesus instructed them to go and show themselves to the priests.

This directive from Jesus immediately implied that the lepers would be healed, for two reasons: first, the act of showing oneself to the priests was required as evidence of healing so one could receive permission to rejoin society. Second, it required the lepers to act out of faith – they were not yet healed; instead, their healing was dependent on them going to the priests, which would have been forbidden of someone still suffering from leprosy.

As the lepers went, they were cured, but one of the men returned to express his gratitude to God, prostrating himself on the ground before Jesus. At this point we learn that the man was a Samaritan, revealing that despite the social isolation that the treatment of lepers caused, leprosy itself broke down social barriers. Lepers were required to live together, as these ten presumably did, in spite of the deep-seated hatred among Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus puts forward three questions at the end of this reading: "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 foreigner?" His questions are left unanswered, but we can assume that that the others were simply following the instructions he had given them to go to the priests. He did not tell them that in order to be healed they must give praise to God, but when the Samaritan is the only one who does, Jesus seems to criticize the others for their impatience and selfishness. Then, when Jesus says, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well," he raises the possibility that in addition to a physical cure, this Samaritan has also received a spiritual cleansing as well.

Jesus' treatment of the Samaritan demonstrated that the traditional assumptions about the Samaritan race were wrong. The established belief that Samaritans were wicked and Jews were holy is obviously false in this story. Like leprosy itself, the actions of the Samaritan leper transcended the societal obstructions of the day. The most unlikely character happens to be the one with the most valuable lesson. He serves as a striking example of how we should approach a life of faith.

Let us seek the welfare of the culture in which we find ourselves, for our own welfare depends on it. Let us praise God in everything with the faith that he will bring us into a spacious place. Let us not be deterred by the trials we face, for they are secondary to the proclamation of the gospel, and with the endurance of trials comes greater faith, wisdom, and favor in the eyes of the Lord. Finally, let us strive to transcend the societal assumptions and cultural stumbling blocks that deter us from imitating Christ in our own lives. The Word of God is not bound by chains, neither by prejudices. May we be like the Samaritan, acting out of faith and giving thanks to God.