

The story of the ten lepers has been one of my favorites ever since I was a child. We must stretch our imaginations to understand the isolated lives of people in Jesus day living with what was then known as leprosy. They were taken from their homes and families and sent to a location far outside of town. They were commanded to shout out the words “unclean, unclean” whenever they ventured into the open so that unsuspecting passerby's would go another way and avoid possible infection.

It was no wonder that when these ten lepers heard that the healer was coming their way, they'd be on the look out, and it was no wonder that if there was even the slightest bit of hope that Jesus could heal them and restore them to their normal lives, that these lepers would beg him to “have mercy on us.” And when they cry out for mercy, Jesus says, “Go and show yourselves to the high priest.” The priest was the “clearing house for social restoration.” Perhaps the lepers were at first confused by Jesus sending them away to see the high priest even before they had been healed.

For it wasn't until they were “on the way” that they discovered they had been cleansed of their leprosy, and so who could blame them for hurrying on to show the priest they were clean, so that they could run to embrace their families. Only one leper, who was a foreigner at that, a Samaritan, who having noticed that he is healed and cleansed of this dreaded disease, stops in his tracks even before the priest gives him the “all clear.” And this leper went back, falling at Jesus feet, thanking him for giving him back his life.

If you or a loved one has ever been given back your life, you understand a thankfulness that is beyond words. If you have lived with illness or want and have received healing or plenty, you understand what thanking, the kind of fall down at Jesus feet thanking, is about. If you wonder if the pain you bear will ever end, and then it does, then your heart overflows with thanksgiving.

We have people within our congregation, not to mention our world, that are in a constant state of illness, want, pain, or despair. Yet, some of these folks have also mastered the art of giving thanks. Their pain is mitigated by thinking of others who in their words: “have it so much worse.” They focus on what they have received and thank God, and they are often very giving people. They notice the suffering of others. They have empathy like God has empathy.

Today on this World Communion Sunday, we gather having received so much from our Creator and from this community gathered. Today we also think about how we are interrelated to God's whole creation. We remember those who need us to hold them up in incredibly tough circumstances. We tell the middle aged man who faces unemployment that he is not defined by his job, but he is defined as a creature of divine love. We tell the child who feels worried that they might fail in school, to do their best and we love them no matter what. To the young adult who is highly educated and has so much to give and can't find a job, we give encouragement. We are all connected in this journey of life and faith, and out of the depths of grace we've known, we give thanks, and give back in every way we can.

Today we receive a tangible reminder of the love we receive from God through Christ as we share this sacred meal. We remember how important it was to share a meal in the time of Jesus, and he shared many meals with the sick, unemployed, and poor. By doing so he acknowledged their importance as people, as children of God. It was a radical thing for him to do. As we

share this meal with Christians throughout the world no matter where they are and what lives they live, we show our solidarity with the Christ who showed us how to love.

Because we have received grace beyond our imaginations, we are thankful far beyond what words can express, and so we lift our gaze to see how we may give this precious gift of God's love to all. We don't give because we feel guilty; we don't give so that we can go to heaven; we give because that's what thankful people do. As breads of the world are presented today, let us think about those countries each bread represents. Let us think about what it's like to walk in their shoes, what their needs and desires are, what God longs for their lives to be like. Let us think about what it means for us to be good neighbors.

Recently, I received a report from the national office of the UCC about where some of our Neighbors in Need gifts have been spent. Six years ago when three hurricanes blasted five southern states, the United Church of Christ sent over \$6 million dollars to help. But we sent more than money; UCC personnel went to support long term recovery and rebuilding efforts, coordinate volunteers, and provide spiritual, emotional, and legal assistance. Neighbors in Need connects us with neighbors who we may never meet face to face, only heart to heart.

There's a hint of a subtext in this story about Jesus' healing the lepers. It is the "foreigner, the Samaritan," who would be considered by Jesus' congregation to be unworthy who is the only one that returns to give thanks. Jesus makes the point that God is no respecter of persons when it comes to healing and dispensing of grace. God's world is not a world of them versus us. It's just God's whole wide world. Because we are thankful, we look outward not inward. Because we've received so much we move from selfishness to selflessness.

Today much strife in our world is because people either don't know how or refuse to be neighborly. Countries dig in their heels rather than make peace. Nations look after their own self interest in spite of the interconnected world from which none of us can escape. The borders of countries were not drawn by God to keep people apart; they are human drawn borders that sometimes make little sense in the course of history.

World Communion Sunday transcends all borders. On this Sunday, we can join with everyone, neighbors close by and neighbors far off and together we can receive, give thanks, and give back. And to do so is to draw closer to the heart of God. Today as we take this bread and drink this cup may we receive and truly, deep within us, know God's abiding grace, and may our hearts overflow with a thankfulness that simply cannot be contained but must be shared with others. Today may the heavens receive our hearts of thanksgiving as we go on our way rejoicing for God is indeed good. All the time! Amen.