

A baptismal meditation delivered by Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 21, October 13, 2013, dedicated to Brett Michael Weaver on his baptismal day, to Jacob Thomas Holton baptized 10/12/13, to Karen Mozingo, AnnaSofia and always to the glory of God!

“Return and Say ‘Thanks!’”
II Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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17:11 could have opened with these words: *“On a day like today, Jesus arose from his sleep, stood up and started down the road to Jerusalem where he knew he would face his death on the cross.”*

But, St. Luke knew something too – that is no way to start a story - even though that is exactly what happened on this day so many years ago. And while on his way to his death on the cross, when Jesus could have been feeling real sorry for himself, focusing on the hardship of “being Jesus” - Jesus entered a village and was met by ten lepers who lived in isolation from the community.

In fact, according to the law, they should never have been seen by him or approached him – even from a distance. But, they did. They heard he was coming. They knew he could cleanse them of their affliction. They cried out for his attention. From a distance he cleansed them. No more suffering. No more starvation. No more bone chilling pain. No more wondering if they could beg for food, or hide in a cave, or cry themselves to sleep at night alone on the edge of the town and in the cold of the desert. No more isolation. **No more leprosy.**

With a word from Jesus, ten lepers were cleansed. But, our story tells us that only one was healed. To be cleansed is one

thing. To be healed is another. Cleansing is a physical experience. Healing is a heart, mind, body and soul-filled experience.

The Samaritan was “healed” when he returned to Jesus and threw himself at the feet of the Master and said “thank you.” This act of faith-filled gratitude “heals” the man. Jesus points to the man and says to the disciples, the faith of this so-called “unfaithful” foreigner has made him well. Wow!

In other words, “Gratitude” heals!

Friends, *“when we learn to read the story of Jesus and see it as the story of the love of God, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves--that insight produces, again and again, a sense of astonished gratitude which is very near the heart of authentic Christian experience.”* ([N.T. Wright](#)). “Astonished Gratitude” produces giving hearts. We cannot say we are “thankful” and then fail to return to say “thank you.” The two do not go together. Generosity is not followed by paucity. Generosity generates great giving.

Trappist monk and mystic, Thomas Merton wrote 50 years ago:

“To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything God has given us - and God has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of God’s love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from God. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, and is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference.”

Such gratitude leads us to burst with praise and wonder in worship and thanksgiving to God. [Nancy Leigh DeMoss](#) puts it this way in her book, [Choosing Gratitude: Your Journey to Joy](#):

*“I have learned that in every circumstance that comes my way, I can choose to respond in one of two ways: **I can whine or I can***

worship! *And I can't worship without giving thanks. It just isn't possible. When we choose the pathway of worship and giving thanks, especially in the midst of difficult circumstances, there is a fragrance, a radiance that issues forth out of our lives to bless the Lord and others."*

So are you a whiner or a worshipper? There is only one right answer, because you can't worship without a heart and mind of "thanks giving." It is impossible to do! Let us be worshipers not whiners. Let our hearts be filled with thanksgiving. Let us be God's healed ones- returning to give thanks for what God has done in our lives.

Speaking of a heart filled with "Thanks" Giving, I have been (finally) touched this week by the healing heart of Karen Mazingo. I finally took time to read her 201 entries posted on Caring Bridge. For the past six months, as Karen has battled cancer for a second time in three years with chemo before surgery, major cancer surgery and chemo after surgery, she has chronicled her story on line.

With titles like "Bright Spots," "Endurance," "Hairy Week," "Shadow Selves," "Hakuna Matata," "Inner Beauty," and "Maggie," Karen weaves a tapestry of her stories through these six long months. Through all her writing, she speaks to all with words of gratitude. With Karen's permission, I share a few of her recent thoughts...

From "Inner Beauty," Karen writes:

So much of cancer takes away a feeling of control over one's body, and I guess for me being bald is the limit. I don't choose to be that open and bare, because I really didn't want to lose my hair, so being bald in public feels like another thing I did not choose.

So my solution is scarves. I found some inspiration from women wearing African head wraps, Jewish tichels, and Muslim hijab and their message of using head scarves to make a statement (One woman said, "My hair is not for public consumption," and I guess I

feel that way about my head). I kind of feel like my bare head is between me and God. But what moved me most was one woman's feeling that her headscarf allows her inner beauty to shine through. She sees the scarf as adorning her head with a crown, and celebrating the beauty of womanhood.

There seems to be pressure to deal with chemo baldness in certain ways, and I've felt it all. But I think a woman's decision is individual, and she deserves to choose whatever helps her inner light shine brightest. So I chose scarves because I like color, and wrapping my head is helping me love it more. It feels healing. And like the stained glass window that was restored last week to our church, it helps me be light and make a choice that is mine, when so many signs would say it is a dark time and I have few choices. No. My scarf is a boundary and a declaration. There will be beauty, and there will be light.

Last night, in an entry entitled, "Oneness and . . . We're Gonna Die" Karen wrote about her time last night at the Wexner Center performance by Young Jean Lee, entitled, "We're Gonna Die."

More and more I am convinced that it is this oneness, or experience of transcendence that heals all pain. In her performance tonight, Young Jean Lee spoke of different moments, words, and gestures of comfort that ease pain . . . the suffering of isolation, fear of aging, terror of invasive medical care, and loss of loved ones. She and her band members ended their performance singing "We're gonna die, and it will be okay," and soon the audience was singing with them, all of us belting out in unison the truth of our lives. And in that oneness, I was no longer aware of pain. This has happened before . . . when I dance, in meditation, in the near sleep state of yoga nidra, when singing or praying. The feeling of oneness envelops and eases distress. We're gonna die, but it will be okay. It's what Jesus said to Mary Magdalene. It's what he taught his disciples. It's what the Buddha, Mohammed, and Krishna taught. Oneness eases suffering. And that oneness is love.

Now on another note . . . Speaking of smallness . . . my eyebrows are falling out. As I watched the moon, I also noticed my eyes were dry, and sure enough, my eyelashes are nearly gone. Sometimes I think cancer is the universe's way of opening the door to spiritual awakenings. We are stripped down to our smallness. So we either walk through the door, or we become lost in the disappearance of our personal details like eyelashes, hair... eyebrows. More and more, I think we wake up to "We're gonna die, but it will be okay." That is, if we choose to cross the threshold set before us.

Karen Mozingo is one my heroes. She gets up each day, gives thanks to God for love, friends, flowers that last longer than the challenges of cancer treatments and of course her most precious gift, AnnaSofia. She teaches Theatre and Art History at The Ohio State University, but she is teaching all of us about moving with and in the spirit of God. She is teaching us to return and give thanks.

Last week she wrote,

Because these chemo side effects are testing my patience; I'm tired; and tired of being tired. On nights like tonight there is nothing to do but pause, take a deep breath, and be grateful that these flowers are still blooming. If they can make it through this week, so can I.

Thanks be to God for Karen Mozingo. And thanks be to God for each one of you who returns to give thanks for God's love and light in your life.

It was a day like today, when Jesus, faced with his own mortality, got up, gave thanks to God, went on his way, cleansed ten and healed one. The one who was healed was the one who returned to give thanks. May you be the one who is healed today. Amen.