

Our fall pledge campaign is kicking off today,
and our theme is, “Tell Out My Soul,”
the first line of that great hymn,
“Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!”

My sermon today isn’t directly about our pledge campaign,
but do notice that both Naaman in our first lesson
and the Samaritan leper in the gospel
are living out this year’s theme.

Their responses to what God has done for them is to tell out,
with all their might, the greatness of the Lord.

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I am going to talk about gratitude this morning,
and about whether you see yourself here as an insider or an outsider.

So, Naaman - the commander of a foreign army -
goes to Israel to beg Elisha to heal him of his leprosy.

But Elisha won’t even come outside to talk to Naaman.
He just sends a message for him to go bathe in the Jordan.
Naaman thinks he’s being mocked, but finally agrees to try it.

When God cures Naaman he says,
“Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”

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800 years later Jesus is out walking
when 10 lepers come and beg him for mercy.

Jesus tells them to go see their priests.

They thought he was blowing them off,

a reaction they had surely experienced many times before,
the reaction Naaman thought he was getting from Elisha.

But as they turn away they discover God has, in fact, healed them.

9 of the men keep on walking, but 1 comes back and drops to his knees,
thanking Jesus for the miracle.

Jesus says that the 9 who kept on walking were Israelites,

God's covenant people,

while the 1 who came back was, like Naaman, a foreigner.

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I wonder if the reason the other 9 didn't turn around and give thanks
is that they were exhausted.

It's hard to be grateful when you're exhausted,

whether that exhaustion is physical, emotional, or spiritual.

For them it was all 3. It's hard to be grateful when you're tired.

The good thing, though, is when you're finally able to rest,

sometimes gratitude just starts welling up inside you.

At least that's been my experience.

Giving yourself time to recover and heal -

giving yourself time to rest - is a spiritual practice.

It's not clever, or shiny,

doesn't require you to be smarter or more spiritual than anybody else.

You just have to trust in God enough to slow down - or stop -

until you can see God's blessings in your life again.

Rest allows gratitude to find its way back into your heart.



Okay, back to these 2 stories. Be careful with them.

To hear the good news properly this morning,
we have to wear 2 hats at the same time.

The first is the outsider's hat.

You have to hear these stories like Naaman would,
like that Samaritan leper would.

As an outsider, these stories are an invitation for you to remember
that God moves in everybody's life.

That even though we divide ourselves into smaller and smaller groups...
God healed the military leader of a rival foreign country,
and then God healed 10 lepers without asking any of them
where they came from.

Thinking about these stories like an outsider reminds you
that God is, in fact, the God of ALL creation and ALL people.



The other hat is the insider's hat. You need to hear these stories
like the baptized member of Christ's body that most of you here are.
As an insider these stories give you two more reminders.

The first is to just stop and give thanks
for what God has done and is doing in your life.

The second is to remember that even though you're baptized,
God doesn't think you're better or more worthy of grace
than anybody else made in His image.

God doesn't love you any more than the people living on the other side
of whatever border it is you've created in your mind.



So you really have to wear both hats to hear the gospel this morning.

If you only wear the insider's hat,
those bracing reminders might start to sound like condemnation.

"I'm one of the 9 who always walks away."

"I'm the one always letting God down."

But if you only wear the outsider's hat,
it's easy to think your outsider status makes you
better than those hypocritical, clubby insiders.

You miss the loving expectation that God has
for those who have chosen to follow Him.

You might hear your own voice and start to think it's God's:
"I am the 1 righteous Samaritan. I am God's special little outsider."



The truth is, when it comes to faith, our hearts are always divided.
All of us are outsiders. All of us are insiders.

One way that manifests at Holy Trinity is with the people
who have come here in the last few years.

We have a lot of new-ish folks right now,
more than at any time in my tenure.

If you're one of those new-ish folks,
it can be easy to think of yourself as an outsider
because you don't know everybody,
because you haven't been on the vestry 3 different times, or whatever.

Or maybe there's something about you that makes you feel different,
that makes you feel like an outsider.

Maybe a feeling of uncertainty when it comes to all this God stuff.

Or not knowing when to bow or cross yourself
(we hear that one a lot).

Or, maybe you're just shy. Whatever it might be for you,
if you feel like an outsider looking in, hear this:

We are not who God wants us to be without you here.

Whoever has whispered to you that you don't really belong,
whether it's people in your past or your own insecurities...
we are not who God wants us to be without you here.



And...AND...I think maybe there are a lot of long-time insiders here
who are asking themselves if that term still fits.

People wondering if they're too old now to keep up,
or too young to be taken seriously.

Who think they're not smart enough to be in charge,
or don't have enough time to give right now,
or enough money to pledge to make a difference.

People looking around and realizing they DON'T know everybody anymore.

Can I tell you what the most heartbreaking thing is for pastors?

It's when people who have been at the heart of the church's life
start to feel like this isn't their church anymore.

People who leave because of a change in the parish's personality,
or because of a change in their own life circumstances,
or because of something the clergy say,
or because of a hurt that happens to them here in the parish.

That sense of loss that makes someone want to leave their parish home,
it's heartbreaking, and sadly it happens everywhere.
It happens here. Maybe it's happened to you before you came here.
But whenever it happens, whatever the cause,
it's always heartbreaking.

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Being an insider is hard sometimes, too, and maybe you're feeling that.
Maybe you're carrying too many burdens right now.

Maybe all you can see are the problems that need fixing,
the work that needs doing,
and not how much we all have to be grateful for.

So many of you have servants' hearts,
but maybe in the middle of all that serving
you lost the sense that it's the Holy Spirit leading, and not you.

If that describes you this morning...
if you used to feel so connected to this place
but now you feel lost or feel estranged...
please know how much you still matter to our life together.

Remember that it's okay to rest.
It's okay to grieve when things aren't like they used to be.
Remember that God is constant even when life isn't.

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So think about our lessons like both an insider and an outsider,
but remember:

There are no insiders to God.

There are no outsiders to God.

We are each of us Naaman, discovering for the first time what God can do.
We are each of us Elisha, helping others to heal.

We are each of us lepers crying out for mercy,
sometimes brought to our knees in gratitude,
sometimes too tired to do anything but keep on walking.

Whoever you are right now, remember how beautiful you are.
You are beautifully made in the image of God.
You belong here, and Christ is working a healing in you
this very morning.

Amen.