ON THE MEANING OF FAITH

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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What does it mean to have faith?

That's a question, I guess, that most of us don't ask too often. For one thing, we are busy most of the time. For another thing, your faith and mine, such as it is, is sometimes tender, like a young spring plant; and we aren't inclined to expose it to the harsh weather of the contemporary world.

Nevertheless, it's good to ask the question from time to time. What <u>does</u> it mean to have faith? This question can help our faith grow into a sturdy maturity.

This morning's gospel lesson gives us three glimpses of the reality of faith.

"On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices and said, 'Jesus Master, have mercy on us'."

Here's one aspect of the reality of faith: <u>a request</u>. The ten lepers request Jesus to have mercy on them. The lepers are in dire need, and they ask Jesus -- as God's representative -- to get them out of their predicament.

Now most people have something in common with the lepers. At least this much: most men stand in one kind of need or another. From physical suffering, hunger or illness, to interpersonal and emotional strains and pressures, with a variety of degrees of severity. You and I may sometimes be so immersed in our own particular predicaments that we imagine that the existence of everyone else is without storm or stress. But it's not true.

To be sure, there may be a few individuals who don't have problems, a few people who can greet each day with a smile and fall asleep every night without twisting and turning with the unresolved moments of the day. ...I'm not sure what to say to you, if you're one of these people.

In any case, the majority of us, I surmise, stand in a state of need, like the lepers. In one way or another our lives are <u>cut</u> by the sharp edge of disappointment, pain, or distress.

It's here, in the context of the wounds of life, that we catch our first glimpse of faith. The lepers call out for mercy. They request a way out of their predicament.

Notice how biblical faith differs at this point from other alternatives. Biblical faith knows no "karma," in the sense of certain oriental religions. Suffering, illness, and despair are <u>not</u> man's inescapable fate. Rather, the New Testament sees them as alien

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intrusions into God's good creation. This is surely one of the reasons, by the way, that modern medicine grew into its maturity in the area influenced by biblical relgion, not in the domain of oriental religion. The Bible is predicated on the promise of healing.

The lepers call out for mercy. They don't keep quiet and accept their fate. So one aspect of faith is a request. As St. Paul says at one point, "let your requests be made known to God."(Phil. 4:6) In short, don't lock yourself inside a shell. Call out for God's representative, whether he be physician, friend, or counselor. Call out to God in prayer and in deed. That's what the lepers did.

But faith means not only to request, it also means to <u>receive</u>.

When Jesus saw the lepers he said to them, "Go show yourselves to the priests." "And as they went," our account says, "they were healed." Through the mediation of Jesus the lepers find a way out of their predicament. They receive the gift of a new beginning.

This happens immediately and without prior conditions. Jesus doesn't ask the lepers to fill out a questionaire. He doesn't inquire whether they somehow deserve to be healed. He doesn't inquire into their motives. Nor does he make them sign any agreement that they will do such and such after they are healed. Jesus hears the request of ten men in dire need and he freely grants them the gift of a new beginning.

I suspect that we sometimes think of faith in a different way. I suspect that we lose sight of the immediacy by which we receive benefits through faith.

For example, it sometimes happens that a young man or woman enters into a certain sexual relationship without deep thought and without the prior will to do so. Such a person may then decide that he has let himself down, that he has failed his partner, and that he has scorned the will of God. Gradually, or even suddenly, a cutting sense of guilt may develop, and he or she may enter into a daily quest to become worthy of life again.

Actually that guilt and that quest need not abide but for the moment. He or she can receive the gift of a new beginning immediately, through the word and power of Christ. That's what the confession at the beginning of the Sunday Service is all about. That's what private confession is all about. Here you go and show yourself to the priests, and on the way you are healed. Here you are entirely forgiven. Freely, immediately, without conditions, through the word and power of Christ.

I might add that talk about such free pardon and healing may well bring righteous indignation down on our heads. The moralists have never really understood or approved of biblical faith. Indeed, the moralists were scandalized by Jesus. He went around healing people and forgiving people without inquiring whether they came to him properly motivated or whether, once they were healed, they were going to lead a proper life. The moralists simply couldn't understand such freedom. But Jesus never wavered at this point.

So the lepers receive the gift of a new beginning, freely and without conditions, through the word and power of God's mediator, the man Jesus. So, in faith, we receive.

We also return. Or, some of us do. That's the third aspect of faith.

"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus's feet, giving him thanks."

This returning is perhaps the most subtle, yet the most natural, aspect of faith. It's so simple a response that it's easy to forget about it, as in the case of the nine lepers. Luke even emphasizes this point in the story when he has Jesus say that the one who returned was a Samaritan, -- that is, one not of the properly religious Jewish stock. Returning to give thanks is so natural and so simple a reaction that the people trained in the complexities of religion forget all about it. That seems to be at least part of Luke's point.

I was in a hospital the other day when a doctor told a certain older man that, with proper treatment, he had ten to twenty years to live, that his leukemia would not send him immediately to the grave, as he had been led to believe. The patient began to glow. He thanked the doctor profusely.

This is the natural reaction, is it not? Presumably the patient could have walked out without a word. That is effect is what the nine lepers did. But genuine faith, our gospel story is suggesting, opens up human existence on every side.

Faith means breaking out of the shell of personal isolation, breaking out of the shell of despair, self-satisfaction, or self-pity. You open yourself with requests. And you open yourself to receive healing, to receive the gift of a new beginning.

But that isn't all. You open up your whole life. You also return thanks. You don't suddenly hold yourself in a shell when the time comes to respond.

This is one of the reasons why it's almost self-evident that the people of Christ should sing hymns of praise to God when they gather. The relatively silent moment of confession, meeting the healing moment of Christ's word and power, naturally gives way to the moment of loud praise.

"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet giving him thanks."

Here, then, is genuine faith. In contrast to the nine who didn't return, the Samaritan's entire life has been opened and has remained open. The lives of the nine are still lacking in the fullness of faith. This is perhaps why Luke has Jesus say to the Samaritan and to the Samaritan alone: "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." This is Jesus' benediction, acknowledging genuine faith.

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This is the benediction we hear, too, albeit in somewhat different words, when our hymns of praise are over. "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

What, then, does it mean to have faith?

It means at least this much, to open our lives: to request, to receive, and to return.

Let's try anew to open our lives in this way, and to stay open. Amen.

"On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices and said, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.' When he saw them he said to them, 'Go show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then said Jesus, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' And he said to him, 'Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."(Luke 17:11-19)