

Pentecost 21C
Luke 17:11-21
October 9, 2016
Grace – River Forest

We're getting settled in quite nicely here in Chicagoland. We love the Junction Diner on Madison and how the train sets keep Owen captivated during dinner. We love walking everywhere we can, already noticing fewer trips to the gas pumps. I doubt I'll ever get tired of catching glimpses of the downtown skyline through the trees. And I have found the place where I will always get my haircuts.

It's the barbershop just up the street from us and it's definitely an old-fashioned guy's club in there. My first haircut started off somewhat awkward. The guys in the room could tell I was new, and I was fearful that I had invaded their inner sanctum. I hesitantly choose a lounge chair in which to sit while waiting. I was fearful that it was someone else's reserved seat and he was going to walk in any minute: my heinous faux-pax prematurely ending my outing.

But my seconds of worry quickly subsided when the barber motioned to me and said, "Come on over, partner." Okay good, I thought, no mistakes yet. I sat down and he asked how I wanted my hair cut. I shared my wishes and he began. We didn't talk much at first. I felt like we were silently sizing each other up. I was wondering if he was the joking kind. He wondering if I knew it was a cash only business. I did not.

The haircut continued and we started chatting a bit, the usual small talk between two strangers. I was feeling pretty good about this whole interaction. I was finding a spot in the barbershop guy's club. He asked what I did for a living and I told him I'm a Lutheran pastor. Then without delay he said, "Oh good, then I can ask you this." And I winced.

I wasn't prepared for a debate or watch him sharpen his axe to grind, which is a fairly regular occurrence when I share my vocation. But his question came calmly and filled with curiosity, "Why?"

"I'm sorry, why am I a pastor?"

"No, why are you a Christian?"

Believe it or not I had never been asked this question. Now, a barber in a city to which I had just moved, on a regular weekday afternoon, standing behind me with clippers and a comb, invites me to respond to the most basic and fundamental question of them all.

"Well," I began, "I've found that being a Christian helps me see the world in a way that makes the good stuff great and the bad stuff bearable. It gives me reasons for gratitude and it gives me reasons for hope."

The barber said, "Hey that's good. You read that in a book didn't you."

I said, "Yeah, parts of it. From a catholic bishop's reflections on life and faith. But I feel the same way."

"Interesting, I'm Catholic and would like to read it." I looked up the book on Amazon and he wrote the title on a piece of paper he had in his pocket. He spun me around in the chair and said, "How does it look?"

"It's perfect." I said. He smiled genuinely, waited for me to come back from the ATM, I paid, and left. "Come back soon," trailed off behind me.

A long memory, I realize, in some ways a test to see if you were paying attention to the reading from 2 Timothy this morning. Thank you for your perseverance. (And if you're interested, the book I mentioned is by Bishop Robert Barron and is titled "And Now I See".)

As we turn our attention to the Gospel of Luke we are met with the familiar story of 10 lepers being made clean with one returning to Jesus to give thanks. While there are certainly words of hope and restoration here, I stand convinced that the nuances of sight are just as important in this gospel. The lepers, those cast off from society, those shunned from life in community, they are seen by Jesus when no one else would dare look upon them. They follow Jesus command to go and be seen by the priests, the only way back into the religious and social community. One leper, a foreigner, a double outsider, living on the fringe of both health and politics, saw that he was healed and he came back. With a single loud voice as voluminous as the 10 calling out for mercy in the beginning he praises God and falls at Jesus' feet.

And it's at Jesus' feet where he receives not only healing, but wholeness. Wellness. Literally...salvation. Salvation from the social and religious barriers that would separate him from the God he praised and the Christ to whom he bowed. Set free to see God's creative and redeeming work in all the world. Set free to see God's Kingdom breaking into that world to destroy the chains that bind him up and hold him down. St. Thomas Aquinas calls it the "beatific vision." Seeing God, because God first sees us. No matter how close to the fringes we may be.

When we look into the rippling reflections of these baptismal waters, we see ourselves as God see us, forgiven, healed, beloved children whose faith as gift inspires and empowers us to go out there see others that way too. Because the beatific vision is not just carved stone walls or ornate stained glassed windows.

The beautiful vision of God's Kingdom breaking into this world is out there by the train stops and on the park benches, in the homeless shelters and the prison cells, in the hospitals and hospices, in the graveyards and the memorial gardens.

Jesus ignores every single social and religious norm when he sees those lepers standing yet far off so that they might be drawn even closer to himself. When the Pharisees ask Jesus when the Kingdom of God was coming, he told them it's not something you observe or point to. Rather it's among you, it's within you. It's a location, a community, a relationship with all of God's people, especially the ones that don't look like you, or talk like you, share your political views, or conform to your social norms.

It's kind of like this table. Where we who are many become one because Christ our host sees us as we really are: sinner, saint, washed, forgiven, loved. It makes the good stuff great and the bad stuff bearable. It gives us reasons for gratitude. It gives us reasons for hope.

What do you see?