

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 23C
Ruth 1:1-19a; Psalm 113; 2 Timothy 2:3-15; Luke 17:11-19

October 14, 2007

Last Sunday the disciples asked Jesus, “Increase our faith.” (Lk 17:5). He replied that with only a very little faith, the size of a mustard seed, they could tell a mulberry tree to be uprooted and plant itself in the sea, and it would do it! With only a very small amount of faith, as Valerie said in her sermon we can do “absurdly amazing things.”

Today in Luke, here *is* faith before the disciples’ very eyes, and our own, for all to see. Faith that made a man *whole*, a man who had been doubly outcast, a Samaritan and a leper.

Today, in the Book of Ruth, here *are* faithfulness, loyalty, self-giving love, and as the story continues, we will see the unexpected, amazing, possibly absurd results that came from Ruth’s faithfulness, loyalty and self-giving love. For Ruth, the daughter in law who would not turn back to her own home and leave her mother in law, in Bethlehem became the wife of Boaz. And the mother of Obed, who fathered Jesse, who was the father of David the king. Ruth, the Moabite, was the great grandmother of King David, and included in the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah. (Ruth 4:17; Matthew 1:5; *cf.*, Luke 3:31-32) Ruth’s faithfulness, loyalty and self-giving love led to a strength and vitality in Israel that would not have happened without her, or certainly not in the same way.

These are really powerful stories. *See whom* they hold up as examples of faith and faithfulness:

Ruth, a foreigner, from Moab across Jordan, a people regarded with suspicion if not enmity by the Israelites. An outsider.

And a leper, a Samaritan, also regarded with suspicion and enmity. An outsider

These are lovely stories. And they could be really disturbing stories. Hearing these stories as an *insider*—in Israel or in the Church—how sure could someone be that God only blesses and cares only for people who are part of the *insider’s* group? It’s the *outsider* who is the heroine in Ruth, the *outsider* who is made whole by his faith in Luke.

“Hey! What about me?” an insider might well ask. “Aren’t I a good example of faith and faithfulness?”

Well, what *about us*? That’s the question each of these stories poses. How alive is our trust in God? How ready would we be to step out in faithfulness, like Ruth? How willing to go out of our way for someone else, let alone leave everything, our roots, our home, our identity? How often do we turn around, midstream, to give praise to God? How often do we give heartfelt thanks?

These are really powerful stories. *See where* they are happening:
In the region between Samaria and Galilee
In the crossing into Moab, and the returning.

These are stories that happen in between, between the known and the safe (Galilee), and the alien and possibly dangerous (Samaria).

It's not so simple with Naomi, *et al.* In the beginning, the known, Israel, became unsafe because of famine. Later, the refuge of Moab (home to Ruth) became an alien place (again for Naomi) because of death.

Still, amazing and fruitful things happened just there in these places of in-between.

They are places of uncertainty, places of risk. They are places of possibility. The region *between* is a holy space, where healing can happen, where the strength of love can make itself known. In the holy space of in-between, we may meet and be met by the Holy One. In the region *between*, we are not dulled by the familiar, we may suddenly recognize the grace of God that *always* precedes and follows us, and be moved to praise God and be deeply grateful.

There is such a holy space not far from here: Franklin Square Park, between the worlds of office buildings and a homeless shelter. Traffic passes on all sides, sirens wail, people walk through or sit on benches to read, talk, eat lunch. While all that goes on, on Tuesday afternoons a community of people rich and poor, black and white, Latino, Asian and other folks gathers there as Street Church, with Christ at the center. People come to be healed, to give and receive love and friendship, to break bread together. To praise God, and to give thanks.

Franklin Square Park is a place in between where we risk feeling helpless, and are reminded of what is real. Insiders and outsiders hold hands there and sing "We shall overcome," and feel our faith and hope strengthened and renewed.

Spaces that are *between* are not easy places to be, but they are spaces where we may become more aware of the presence of something other, and holy. There are "thin places" where God is felt to be close. The Outer Hebrides, this isle of Iona off the west coast of Scotland, out there, between the land and the wide ocean. Mount Sinai, other holy mountains, high up between earth and heaven.

There are also in-between spaces that are not places so much as periods or times in our lives. We often find ourselves in spaces of unknowing in our lives, in-between, not knowing how things will turn out or what will come next. Most of us at Redeemer have been in such an in-between space for the past few months.

Not as lepers, Samaritans, Moabites, or homeless. But still, we have been in-between. We moved into a place of risk and unknowing, when we became part of the Diocese of Nevada's search for their new bishop.

A month ago, Allen and I traveled to Nevada and through the diocese. While you did not go there with us physically, we were all on the journey. We were all offering something of ourselves for the sake of the wider Church. All preparing on some level to let go, if that was what would be asked of us.

We were in that space with mixed feelings: pride, a sense of joy, expectation, sadness, anxiety, fear. Not in chains, like the Apostle Paul in today's Epistle (2 Timothy 2:8-9). Not suffering. But with some anticipation of grief and loss.

In that space, we were faithful. The answer to the question posed by today's Scripture is evident. We were all standing out on the word of God, with no other visible means of support, as Maya Angelou once described trusting God. You accepted the risk of losing your rector. Allen and I accepted the risk of leaving you, and the east, and entering a very different place and different circumstances, some of which would have been hard. Because we did this we have grown, all of us. Because we risked living in that in-between place, we are changed, in ways we cannot even see or name yet.

And now, that I was not elected, many of us have had mixed feelings again: disappointment, relief, a new kind of joy. We are glad, and a little sad, at the same time. But *glad*, and not only because I won't be going. We are glad, I think, because we have been so deeply blessed and enlarged by what we dared. Because the Lord was in it all, in that holy place of in between. God's grace preceded and followed us all the way. We were challenged, met, surrounded, upheld by God's presence between the safe and the known, and the unknown.

We were not healed, exactly, but we *were* transformed, enriched and strengthened, made more whole, more who we are and who we are called to be.

The response of faith to all that is the response of the tenth (or first) leper who was both healed and made whole: to praise God. To be grateful both for what was asked of us and what we were able to offer. Our faithful response is to give thanks for all of it.

And it is not over. The election is over. The Nevada bishop search is over. We are released from that. But what God is doing with, in, and among us goes on. We have not gone back, we cannot go back to where we were when we started. We are on the move, with God's grace preceding and following us. The Holy Spirit is stirring in us, and stirring us up. There are all kinds of signs of this.

Some are related to the bishop search. It was something to be proud of. Redeemer is "famous"—our website has been on the home page of Episcopal News Service since Friday, at the top of the list of the "also-rans."

Some signs we recognize in our worship, and hear in our music—the pipe organ! The dedicatory concerts next week end, the strong and vibrant choirs.

There are signs related to Christian formation—Church School, Godly Play, new curriculum for older students, education for adults.

Some signs of the Spirit's stirring are in outreach—tutoring, Street Church, the Mini Walk to Help the Homeless in 2 weeks, our growing awareness of the Millennium Development Goals.

But the Spirit's stirring us to be on the move is not really about programs, however solid and worthwhile. It is in our recognizing the presence of the Holy, feeling the effects of the Invisible One, the power of the crucified and risen Christ in us and among us. And in our turning and returning to give praise to God, to return thanks for all God has done, drawing us deeper into relationship with God and one another, and in service to all God's children.

We can answer the question, are we willing to step out in faith and trust. We were ready to step out. We are ready to step out into whatever is coming toward us now. Thanks be to God.

“Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.”