

The glory of God is a human being fully alive. One might say that's what every gospel story of Jesus is about. At least this one, anyway. Hear what the Spirit may say. {read Luke 17:11-19}

It's time to bring it home! Maybe that's a better title for this last sermon in a little series. We've been walking in faith through greatest hits of the Bible with landmarks of theology to guide our way. We geared up, clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, holy goodness inside us more than sin. We found the path in three steps or signposts—naming wrong, inhibiting harm, cultivating right. We followed our leader, trusting Jesus' mercy, persistence, God's resurrection power in him and pointing others to his way. We explored alternate routes revealed in scripture, in conversation, in ways of living unimagined. We joined companions of other faiths, serving beyond preserving self, receiving inspired clarity about who we are. Now we bring it home—what is the end, the ultimate goal of our human life? Jesus envisions us welcomed into an eternal home of Holy Love when our steps in this life cease. How are we fulfilled as we keep walking in faith 'til then, coming into this holy sanctuary, going again on our journeys, seeking God amid in our world?

Now we bring it home, with joy. Like six Italians just ahead of us the first time I walked the Camino to Santiago. The last morning of our journey. Nearing a village

where ages ago people paused and bathed, washed clothes or burned them, tended hurts for the final steps to the holy cathedral sanctuary. In that spirit, though surely not as bad as long ago, we saw pilgrims around us with weary paces, dirty shoes, worn attire. But these Italians bounced jauntily, bellowing songs, like: “Volare, oh oh; Cantare, oh oh oh oh ...” Remember? Want to sing along?! Don’t know the rest of the lyrics, but it was my first car! Joy! Like our kids last Sunday at the farm—animal petting, maze-running, zip-lining. Like Thursday morning Women’s Bible Study—raucous laughter peeling above my office, like sounds of heaven, angels at a party!

Friends, joy and abundant life is really what faith is all about. It’s where our walk is heading. Sometimes heavenly joy rises in us from a sense of overwhelming blessing. We stroll in nature, eyes feasting on beautiful vistas of mountains, seas, forests. Hearts soaring with birds, leaping with creatures, singing with wind-rustled leaves or rolling waves. Souls swelling with wonder, humility, gratitude and inexpressible longing to know intimately the Divine Source of it all. It’s the glory of God! Praise, unbridled joy can arise when all seems right with life as a gift far beyond anything we alone create or accomplish. We cherish moments, places, experiences that linger in memory, and trigger pheromones, seemingly forever.

Sometimes it’s more like the leper coming to Jesus. Or like the Psalm imagines David praising God’s steadfast love with joyful lips—meditating at night alone in the wilderness, fleeing King Saul or David’s son Absalom with their armies, longing to sing together again in the temple. Times when we feel lost, alone in a wilderness, or like a leper amid the world but literally out of touch with it. Does an experience rise in our memory, maybe someone we know, people we hear about—suffering physically, anxious or afraid mentally, abused emotionally, isolated socially, condemned religiously. Longing to be bathed in love, to be nurtured with hope, to be simply connected again in community.

Ten lepers approach Jesus. From afar, following religious rules, they cry out. They don't shout "unclean! unclean!" as directed by culture and religion to define them. No, they defy prejudice and courageously plea: "Jesus, have mercy on us!" Jesus sees them, angles closer through the crowd separating them, and he tenderly blesses with a charge. As he's going to Jerusalem, he instructs: Go, to priestly powers that be and get declared clean, welcomed back into community. They walk. Their physical malady ceases. One in ten turns around in gratitude and praises God's grace. He brings it home. And that's when he receives Jesus' full blessing—"Go on your way in peace; your faith has made you well."

You see, friends, more than medical attention to the body, it's about salvation. That's literally the word for "made well." Saved. The person with leprosy receives grace, responds with gratitude, joyfully praising God and prostrating to offer one's whole life to Holy Purpose. Then comes salvation—really, a kind of resurrection, loving relationship restored with God and others. And so it doesn't get tribal, Luke stresses it was a demeaned, despised-though-distant-cousin-Samaritan who goes on God's way, with a change of heart. He turned around from hurt, sadness, bitterness. Now he's bringing it home in the joy of God's glory!

Who knows where he's actually heading. Luke doesn't tell us. More than any particular location, home is anywhere we share life with people and know we're loved, find purpose through service and fill with joy and peace! That relation in Christ is our destination. That living faith we keep walking is wholeness God intends for us. That healing grace, that full life, that hopeful joy rises from gratitude. Two weeks ago, we outlined five basic affirmations of Christian faith: Holy Love is sovereign, empowering all life. Jesus is central, revealing the way of Love. Scripture is our inspired guide, especially when shared in conversation. We depend ultimately

on Sacred Grace. And now, today, we respond with gratitude that leads to joyful purpose!

And friends, here's the real good news for us. We share God's glory of salvation, even more deeply and completely when we receive divine grace amid trouble and hard times. In the wilderness, David is hunted by soldiers, maybe haunted by personal sin. Right there amid barrenness he receives a blessing. He sees divine beauty in those hills. He senses holy intimacy. "You are my God. My soul, my deepest being thirsts for you, as if faith is as dry and lifeless as this land. I seek your steadfast love, the ground and source of all being," he sings, "I give my life to you here as in your holy sanctuary." "Volare, oh oh; Cantare, oh oh oh oh ..."

That's the deep gratitude and peace and joy I've known pilgrim companions bringing home as we walk together. Yes, life is hard. Loss is real, or really possible. Yet, still there is life. Still there are people we love. And despite all that's wrong, we see goodness. Despite fear, we feel hope. Despite struggle or grief, we feel grateful. Leprous sores of our souls get healed. And we turn around, moved profoundly, to "walk in newness of life" as Paul writes to the Romans. As grace abounds, we share baptism in Christ's death, and just as Christ was raised by the glory of God, we too walk in newness of life! (Romans 6:1-4)

We keep walking, bringing it home, as Lester and our choir sang moments ago. That gospel tune echoes through oppressive wilderness wanderings from the crucible of slavery to Jim Crow and beyond. "I know God delivers in time of storm." Moses. The fiery furnace. Trust and never doubt; God never failed yet. Bringing it home ... gratitude, praise, trust, joy in life together ... the heart of faith.

But, friends, what about when the church does fail in the eyes of our hearts—causing hurt or complicit in it? What about when it seems we or others don't get

how faith relates to what human experience is like? As we walk through life, inevitably there'll be times when words we learned or even had to memorize as a child don't speak to us. When tunes don't make our hearts sing. When rituals seem distant and ways of operating seem wrong. When we gather in God's presence, with all our differences, our doubts and tears and fears ... and tremors quake the common ground we long for. Abuses uncovered or voices untempered don't make the church's invitation to the Sacred seem one we want to accept. Friends, we aren't perfect in this congregation. Stridency in society can strain our bonds and wound our belief. And truth is, though we have little say in what other churches do, in many minds we'll be tainted, discounted by association.

It may be unfair. It can hurt when we care. I affirm what people feel is real. I don't accept that's the end of it. You see, I believe the end, the ultimate goal for each of us, our holy destination together, is healing, gratitude, joy and peace. Glory of God when we're fully alive! That's good news to which I give my heart in trust and my life in service! That's one way of seeing all our worship in this sanctuary, all our service beyond these walls: part of the holy journey from healing through gratitude to joyful purpose and peace.

So we keep walking to the font. As we cradle and bathe a child in God's love, we know life ahead for one so vulnerable and innocent will have trials and triumphs, hurts and healing. As an adult kneels—at 18 or 88—life has surely had its share already. And we hope dearly, we trust that beauty and goodness will not be lost. Even if a child never stops screaming as we walk the aisle, singing a blessing. Even if adults understand less of the Divine Mystery than mathematical calculus to get us to Mars. The Eternal Spring of Steadfast Love invites us to come as we are and promises to never turn us away. In that promise we grow in purpose, and God is glorified!

So we keep walking to the table. Here we join with all people across all boundaries of society. Here we nurture life through gratitude—that's one literal name for the sacrament we share—"Eucharist" means thanksgiving. We taste mere morsels to remind us how Jesus showed that Holy Love nourishes our deepest hungers more truly and completely than anything else in life. And we proclaim there are no barriers to receiving this grace. And we celebrate it's so abounding sometimes we don't know what to do. Like the little girl last week who took a piece of bread from the basket to find two were stuck together. Pause. Flicker of concern. Glance toward mom. No problem, just keep it, we said, as mother and I smiled. Friends, it's a joyful feast of God with us and God is glorified!

So we keep walking in this sanctuary or wherever else we pray and learn together. Amid many responsibilities, distractions, and other messages we hear every day, we receive Grace and center our hearts in Love. We turn around again and again, inspired to serve—to give that others may live. And we discover: what we get out of worship in here or service out there flows from what we give in thanks and praise. Beyond naïve bliss or blithe denial, we face reality. And the power of resurrection gets revealed, bringing new life through love.

We keep walking like a teen who knew a classmate's unhealthy choices; and lack of family support. The teen came home to process with parents ... after already speaking with teachers and administrators trying to get the friend some help. You see, when others steered clear, the teen didn't want this classmate to be abandoned, rather to have a chance at healing. Whether or not thanks was voiced, I see it's an act of gratitude for healing love the teen received in life, that inspired purpose, serving another, seeking true joy and peace. Bringing home the glory of God!

We keep walking like Clarence, who washes dishes for CTV and every week declares for all to hear: he's never had a bad day! Now he's talked about growing up in the Jim Crow south, and plenty of other concerns—losing part of a leg. We do talk about how life's not always easy. Still he keeps walking in newness of life. Literally ... on a new leg he's about to receive. Grateful for what's good, he finds purpose in humble service, his radiant smile spreading joy to anyone in sight. Bringing home the glory of God!

We keep walking like many of you that say something like: I don't know what I'd do without this church! Grateful for friendships every day, especially at times of surgery, cancer treatment, grieving loss, life transitions. Grateful for the sense of holiness and beauty in this space. Grateful for the witness we offer to the world the way God wants it to be. So grateful we keep seeking what we can give in return, in an eternal symbiosis of grace, an unending cycle of humble, joyful love giving life. Bringing home the glory of God!

And now as we come to an end, one final note about this sermon series and all of living faith. I walked in Spain. I thought of our life together. I longed for a way to frame what we believe and how we live to make sense of our everyday journey with God and others. Many of you have expressed gratitude. Inasmuch as something we've shared has touched, maybe healed, hopefully inspired, I'm grateful too. Not just for the outcome of what we've shared but for the origin—that is, what I receive from you. The stories, the laughter, the questions, the meals, the humble contributions no one really knows, the passion, the conversation, the inspiration in how we all keep pursuing life with courage, within the purposes of God. All the ways we give and receive in the symbiotic cycle of our life in grace at its best, which inherit over the ages, and impart for years to come.

Like the blessing I received as a child here and updated a bit in our time and place.
Go out into the world in peace, but don't expect to find peace in every place we go.

If we're grateful for anything in these sermons, this faith we share, go live it, offer it to others in the joy of life to the glory of God! Let every instrument of our lives be tuned for praise! Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise! And may God give us faith to walk and sing always: Volare! Alleluia!

Thanks be to God. Amen.