

The One Thing God Cannot Do

Proper 23, Year C – 2 Timothy 2:8-15, Luke 17:11-19

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October 10, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

“If we are faithless,” Paul reminds his beloved friend, Timothy, “Christ remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.”

Earlier this week, one of my Internet correspondents repeated the old question that has always been a favorite among students of philosophy and theology. In its usual formulation, the question goes, “If God is all-powerful, can God create a rock so large that God cannot lift it?” I couldn’t resist responding with my own answer to that question: “It all depends... on God.” If God wants to *make* such a rock, then *of course* he can make it. If God wants to *lift* such a rock, then of course he can lift it. One of the basic things we mean when we talk about God at all, is that God is not limited by anything external to God’s self. But whether you’re talking logically or theologically, when it comes to questions of what God can or *cannot* do, it all depends... on God. Because in working his will, of course, God *does* set limits on *himself*.

These days it is considered by many to be ignorant or naïve or overtly anthropocentric to say so, but the message that comes through loud and clear in the creation stories of the book of Genesis is that in creating humankind, God did something special and unique. If the message of Scripture is to be trusted at all, we must accept that we were created with a unique purpose – to love God. Not just to praise God – throngs of angels do that without ceasing. Not just to give God glory – we’re told that the very rocks do that, in their own, very *concrete* way. You and I were given the incredible gift of being made in the image of God *precisely* so that we could return God’s love for us, so that *we* can participate in the eternal love that sang into being all that is, seen and unseen.

The kicker is, that in order to include such creatures as us in creation, in order to equip us for our *raison d’être*, our reason for being, in order to allow us to be truly in union with the divine, God had to implant in *us* the free will that is part of God’s own essence. Follow me here. God can make any rock God wants to. God can *lift* any rock God wants to. But because God wants us to love him, God cannot *make* us love him. As we hear about far too often these days, compliance with the forced demands of another may be a *lot* of things, but it is *certainly* not love. In order for us to have the ability to say “yes” to God’s eternal love, God has given us the incredible, the *awe*-full freedom... to say “no” as well.

“If *we* are faithless,” says Paul, “*Christ* remains faithful – for he *cannot* deny himself.”

On his way to Jerusalem to pay the cost of such faithfulness, Jesus encounters, or more accurately, is *accosted* by, a group of lepers. These men were not like the others – the sick, the lame, the blind – the others that called out to Jesus for help along the way. They could have been suffering from any number of skin diseases because they were all lumped together as leprosy in those days, but whatever they had, the consequence was that they were excluded from participation in normal society. Their condition made them feared by their families, unwelcome in their synagogues, outcasts from society. Because of the nature of their disease, they had become totally disconnected from everything, and from everyone. They were not even to come *near* a normal person without yelling out “Unclean, Unclean,” as a warning.

But this day on the road to Jerusalem, *these* ten cried out, “Jesus, have mercy on us!” And Jesus stepped aside from his journey and addressed them. A hush probably fell over the crowd as they waited to see what this healing prophet would do with these unclean, unloved, *untouchable* creatures. But the hush

got even deeper when he said, “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” The crowds may have been amazed that he hadn’t performed some more physical expression of healing. But the men, all ten of them, immediately did what they had been told – they set off to find the priest that could pronounce them clean. And somewhere along their way, clean is what they *became*. Nine of them continued on their way, no doubt nearly tripping over each other to be the first to do what Jesus had told them to do, the first to show himself to the priest, the first to regain his place among his family and loved ones and friends, the first to share the wonderful news that Jesus had made them clean.

Only one strayed from that mission. Only one turned back. Only one, the story tells us, came and fell at Jesus’ feet to give thanks. And Jesus is left to ask, “Where are the other nine?” As a man, it must have broken Jesus’ heart that only one returned to enter into a relationship. But as the eternal Son of God, Jesus knew full well that the only way that the thanks of the one could truly be the result of love, was to watch the other nine just keep walking.

“If we are faithless, Christ remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.” That is the *gospel*, Paul says, the Good News, the Word of God that is not chained. The God who created us, the God who loves us, incessantly, *relentlessly* calls us to turn our heart toward him. In every heart is the knowledge that God is the very source of every good and perfect thing. Deep down we know that we need to be joined to him in order to fulfill who we really are. Deep down we are aware that the creative process is still at work within our souls. Deep down we hunger for *intimacy* with our Savior. But every day, every hour, every *moment*, we still have the freedom to turn to our Father, or to turn the other way. Every *moment* we have the freedom to be like the nine who walked away, or to be the one who returned shouting, “Glory!” The only offering our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer wants from each of us is for us to *return* the love that he has ever had *for us*. That is as true today as it was along the road to Jerusalem that day, or in the Garden of Eden at the very beginning.

If the only reason you are sitting here this morning is that your parents, and their parents, and *their* parents were good churchmen and churchwomen, then you might as well just stick with the American Legion, or the DAR, or the Rotary, or any *number* of other venerable and beneficial organizations. If the only reason you are sitting here this morning is that you enjoy the sights and the sounds and the pageantry of this place, then you might as well just buy season tickets for the symphony, or the theater. or your favorite ball team. If the only reason you are sitting here this morning is that you feel some sort of *obligation*, then you might just as well be dozing in a more comfortable chair – certainly *that’s* not that hard to find.

But if, like the ten unclean men met on the road to Jerusalem, you know in your heart that you have been cleansed of whatever had separated you from God, whatever had kept you from fully loving those that love you, then make your presence among the People of God a sign of your faithfulness to the ministry we share in Christ’s name. If like the one who returned, your only proper response to Christ’s goodness and mercy in your life is to fall at his feet, then this morning, and *every* morning, open your heart as *well* as your senses to the unqualified, unreserved, *unconditional* worship of the living God. If like this poor sinner, you can’t *count* the things that God has done for you, any more than you could count the stars in the heavens, then *embrace* the one who kissed you into creation and reaches out to you every moment of creation, and make every action, make every thought, make every moment of *yours*, the faithful response of your thankful heart.

“If we are faithless,” Paul reminds us, “Christ remains faithful.” For the *one* thing that God *cannot* do, is *ever* not love *you*.