

<https://www.facebook.com/DecaturDisciples/>

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 19, 2020

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

“Return”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Holy Scriptures: Luke 17: 11-19

Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

And as they went, they were made clean.

¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Return

Luis told Elsie he’d seen a beautiful light, beckoning,
and was moving forward,

when he either heard or felt

that he was being called back, to return.

Luis confided to his wife this resurrection thing was a mixed blessing.

He had awakened in the operating room

to find himself back in a body wracked with pain.

On the other hand, Luis said, he no longer feared dying.

Luis Ortiz had worked at the city bus garage as a mechanic,

telling Elsie that they kept the bus diesel engines running

while he was underneath,

diesel exhaust surrounding Luis

down in the oily cement trench.

So, when the lump first appeared and his cancer was confirmed,
they knew why.

The first surprise was his emergency surgery.

Afterward, in the recovery room with Elsie

and his mother Quintina at his side,

Luis' heart stopped.
Two nurses in starched whites whisked him back to the OR,
 banging his bed through swinging doors.
Left alone in a sterile room, powerless to help, distraught,
 Quintina and Elsie clung to each other.
They began to pray, thanking Jesus for their blessings,
 pleading for one more day with Luis,
 to please, please return him to his three children, to them.
They prayed with confidence, trusting that Someone was listening.
Quintina was a prayer warrior,
 one of the servants of Christ who shaped my spiritual formation.
When she prayed,
 I knew she was talking to Someone,
 and that Someone was listening
 on the other end of the conversation.
During my middle school years,
 I went to her home for Sunday School,
 her apartment being on the third floor of our church,
 which claimed an East Harlem tenement as physical plant.
We lived directly above her.
She told me that whenever my dad walked across our living room floor,
 her family called him The Giant.
Sitting on her plastic-covered couch,
 I was grateful she remembered to barricade her dogs,
 Pebbles and Romeo, in her bedroom.
On weekday afternoons,
 whenever her Chihuahuas heard my footsteps
 nearing the third-floor landing,
 their yapping warned of encroaching danger.
Quintina would open her door to see what was happening,
 as if she didn't already know who walked upstairs
 every school day at 3:15.
Romeo and Pebbles knew,
 and they could smell my fear.
Out would scurry Pebbles and Romeo,
 toenails scratching tile flooring,
 intent on tearing into my ankles.
Sometimes I made to the safety of our fourth-floor landing,
 sometimes not.
Sitting now in her front room,
 I idly scratched the scabs behind my ankles,
 vivid, physical, lasting legacies of Pebbles and Romeo.
The aroma of Quintina's *arroz con pollo* cooking in the big pot on the stove
 made it hard to study Bible lessons and memory verses.

Sensing her students' distraction,
she spoke about growing up in Puerto Rico.
*"During the Great Depression, I was still a little girl.
Sometimes my family had only a pot of thin soup."*
Quintina now stood in her living room, stirring with an imaginary spoon –
*"While stirring the soup mi madre prayed to Jesus.
She asked Jesus to please stretch the soup
so that her husband and children might eat.
She prayed so hard she cried."*
Still stirring, she mimed wiping away her tears.
Her cheeks were damp, mascara blurry.
I'm 13 years old and getting choked up.
Quintina was back in her Caribbean isle.
"I watched as the soup's steam rose and my mother's tears rolled down,"
she said. *"Jesus provided enough.
Mi madre gave Jesus thanks."*

Her son Luis Ortiz, coping with cancer,
had mixed feelings about his life after life.
He had lost his fear of dying yet the painful cancer remained.
He wasn't so sure about thanking Jesus for the reprieve,
the return, the resurrection.

Quintina had no such qualms.
She was determined to thank her Jesus for saving her son.
Personally.
She called Mercedes.
Quintina was plump and squat, a ready smile on her lips,
feet solidly planted on *terra firma*,
with a head for business and numbers.
Mercedes, her sister, was thin with a regal bearing.
Serious without being severe, solemn,
Mercedes offered occasional flashes of warmth
that made me glad to be in her presence.
Some people in the Church of the Living Hope liked to say or shout "Amen!"
Mercedes preferred to quote the exclamation of Thomas the Twin.
Mercedes would exclaim, *"My Lord and my God!"*

Quintina asked Mercedes to collect their prayer circle
called The Healing Community.
Mercedes called my mother, Buffy Calvert, who was part of the prayer circle,
along with her good friend the Reverend Peg Eddy.
The three made the necessary arrangements.
A church meeting room was booked.

Refreshments were prepared.
Word spread that The Healing Community was gathering.
One of the circle memorized the gospel story of Jesus and the ten lepers,
a tale about ten people who beg a passing Jesus for mercy,
so he miraculously heals all ten of their leprosy
and they go their merry way;
however, only one soul returns to express gratitude.
All was set for The Healing Community to gather for thanksgiving.
Luis, Elsie, and their two daughters were present,
seated near the front.
Their eldest son Junior was away at college.
After this night Luis would live another two years on earth.

That evening, Mercedes played the part of Jesus.
Ten women pretended to be lepers on the side of a dusty road.
Mercedes walked across the room as if she were on the way to Jerusalem.
Quintina, Buffy, Peggy and the other seven lepers stood at a distance,
hurting, craving wholeness, feeling invisible.
When Mercedes walked by, they cried out:
"Help us, Jesus! Jesus, Master have mercy on us!"
They rushed toward Mercedes.
They received her touch.
They were resurrected, renewed, made like new by the love of God.
They leapt in the air, clapped and shouted:
"I'm healed! We're healed!"
My mother shared with me that that evening, being cured,
she experienced an electric feeling of gladness.
She and the other healed lepers returned to their seats, rejoicing, so happy.
All returned to their places...except one.
One soul sought out the wounded healer.
Playing the role of the healed leper who gave thanks,
Quintina turned around.
Focused, determined to express gratitude for a life resurrected by Jesus,
she returned.
The two sisters stood face to face.
They held hands.
Quintina, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks,
knelt at Mercedes' feet and lifted her arms to heaven.
"Gracias, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus."
And Jesus said, *"My Lord and my God."*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!