

Eyes To See

Luke 17:11-19

February 26, 2017

In 1987 the State of California held its very first High School State Championship for boys cross country running. While holding a State Championship in a sporting event is not remarkable in and of itself, the fact that a group of novice runners from the tiny farm town of McFarland came out on top is. And I am not the only one to think this, as this remarkable story served as the inspiration for the major motion picture known as “McFarland USA” that came out in February of 2015.

The story (of “McFarland, USA”) began when Coach Jim White took an unlikely group of McFarland High School students and turned them into a champion cross-country running team, and ultimately building a cross-country dynasty. Year after year, Coach White’s kids won titles, 9 in 15 years to be exact, but the titles are only part of the story, and to the real-life people depicted in the movie the titles paled in comparison to the life-long relationships created by Coach White believing in them and them believing in Coach White.

McFarland, for those who are unfamiliar with the town, is an agricultural community located in the central valley of California. Like the town, McFarland High School is predominantly Latino, children of “pickers” or farmworkers paid low wages for doing grueling back-breaking work in the fields. Even some of the students work in the fields before and after school each. It has been said that McFarland “is a farming town where its kids are invisible. They come from the fields and they go back to the fields.”

All of that seemed to change when Coach White saw something others hadn’t even though it was right in front of them to whole time... These boys could run and they were fast. And you know something, 30 years later all of those involved in the beginning and even those who have benefitted since say thank you.

If we are honest with ourselves, each one of us owes a debt of gratitude to many other people. I certainly do. But it seems we have decided that uttering the words “thank you” to another soul is to admit that we are or were dependent upon them. And with the value we place on independence in our society, dependence is often seen as a form of weakness. The reality is none of us would be who we are or where we are without the help and support of others. Whether its parents, grandparents, teaches or coaches, none of us does it alone.

For those who see themselves as self-sufficient, it is all an illusion.

Our text for today finds Jesus on his way to Jerusalem from Galilee. As he came to the border of Samaria, he saw a group of lepers off at a distance. The Law, set out in Leviticus, required those labeled as lepers to keep a safe distance from others for fear that the disease would spread. Their knowledge of the Law is believed to be the reason the 10 kept their distance when they called out for Jesus to have mercy on them. He responded to their request by saying “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

Now you may be saying, what kind of response was that and if that is the case then it seems important to know that according to the Law, only the priests could declare a person clean or unclean. This meant the priests had incredible social power for they decided if someone was to be removed from society, from their family, from their life and they decided if someone was to be re-united with their family, with society. So it seems safe for us to say that Jesus' response would make complete sense to those 10 lepers.

So they went, but then, as they were on their journey to the priests, something happened: they were made clean. How they knew this, we are not exactly sure, but as I was just recently reminded, there are many things we simply don't know when it comes to the details of this story. For instance, some of us may think that as these 10 turned to take their 1st step in going to show themselves to the priests, they saw that they were made clean. The funny thing about that though is the text only says "as they went" without any referenced to time. The text also tells us only 1 of them actually saw that he was healed, but it doesn't tell us at what point on his journey he saw.

And knowing that they traveled on foot, and they were a good distance from Jerusalem makes me wonder how much of the journey to the priests was complete. Now this doesn't mean that the stories aren't true. What it does mean is that we can very easily insert our ideas into the story when our ideas are not part of the text.

But we do know that the one who saw returned to Jesus, bowed down and praised God.

Now maybe we find ourselves wondering about the other 9 because it appears Jesus wondered about them. Remember, he did ask, "Did I not heal 10 men? Where are the other 9? Does only this foreigner return to give glory to God?"

The thing is, even though we might sense a bit of exasperation in Jesus' questions, I'm not so sure this gospel story requires the other 9 to be bad or corrupt people. Could it be that they were more obedient to Jesus' instructions? Didn't they keep going to the priest as Jesus told them and as the law asked of them. Surely there is nothing wrong with doing what Jesus asks of you. Could it be that only 1 of them has Eyes to See?

But, then I wonder if Jesus was making a different point altogether. Maybe Jesus was teaching that healing requires more than physical recovery and pronouncement by people with authority. Maybe true healing requires gratitude. The kind of gratitude shown in saying thank you and acknowledging the gifts you have received, especially gifts from God. Maybe this is why Jesus said to this foreigner, "your faith has made you well." And as much as I want to talk about Jesus praising someone while calling him a foreigner, that is a sermon for a different day.

In terms of Faith, though, I love the way Father Richard Rohr talks about this kind of faith. "He compares it to falling in love. We fall into faith. We don't achieve it or earn it or gain it through something we do, we simply fall into it. We let go. We let gratitude

fill us and we find that our lives become expressions of praise. Without that kind of falling, if we're still grasping on to our own attempts to be healed or made whole, we are missing out on that life-giving offer of God's to make us well." In this way, falling into faith opens our eyes to God's reality.

Only one came back to express gratitude. Only one and Jesus told him that his faith had made him well.

If you are like me, though, you may still find yourself wondering about the other 9. The text tells us that they were made clean too, but you know something, it is so unfair for me to pass judgment on the other 9, especially when I feel like I know them so well. Even in my own life there are a lot of people who have needed to hear my "thank yous" across the years, and I hope I have done a good job of telling them. Truth be told though, I know there are some I could have done a better job with. You see it is entirely possible to "feel" gratitude in your heart, and leave it at that. Sometimes, though, we need to "say" it so that those for whom we are thankful actually know it.

Failing to express gratitude may be seen as bad manners; but it feeds into the illusion of self-sufficiency. If we never have to give thanks, we never have to acknowledge our dependence upon others. Now I dare say that any one of us would declare that we are dependent upon no one; but are there people in your life who need to hear...but have never heard...your gratitude...your sincere "thank you?"

The words themselves... "thank you"... may sound trite or simple, but they are profound. The very act of worship is nothing less than a grand "thank you" to God. That is what our hymns do. That is what our prayers say. That is what our very presence in this place shouts! We are not self-sufficient. We need God and we need each other. And although the movie doesn't show how much Coach White and his boys believed in and depended on God, if you dig a little bit you will find that it played a significant role. For those with eyes to see, their story illustrates just how much we need both.

If we are honest, each one of us owes a debt of gratitude to many other people, but to utter the words "thank you" to another is to admit that we are or were dependent upon them... And you know something we are. None of us would be who we are or where we are without the help and support of others, whether its parents, grandparents, teachers or coaches, or God.

Sometimes we need to thank God. Sometimes we need to thank others. Sometimes we need to thank both. But we must never take either for granted or succumb to the illusion that we do it alone.

And as we go, may we be blessed with eyes to see and then may we say thank you.

In Jesus' name...Amen.