

Bold and Fruitful
 Luke 17:11-19
 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer
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When you read the Bible, do you ever ask yourself, "Which of these characters am I?" Are you Lot, or Lot's wife? (She looked back and turned to salt.) Are you the favored son, Joseph, or one of the brothers who sold him off to slavery? Are you Jonah, or the whale?

In the story of the ten lepers, the obvious question is, "Would I be the one to return and give thanks?" "Or would I be one of the other nine?" And there are also others to identify with in this story. There are the on-lookers. Jesus speaks to the people in the village when he says, "But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Jesus is teaching in the village. If *you* were in the village watching and listening to Jesus teaching, would you have been skeptical, or would you have been one of those to trust Jesus and praise God?

Jesus is actually teaching with more than just words.

Before he speaks, Jesus is teaching with his behavior. The very location of where he is, is a lesson. Jesus is on the way from Galilee to Samaria. He is crossing a cultural border. Jews hated the Samaritans, yet Jesus is crossing into Samaria, entering a village. His behavior is **bold**.

The lepers are also crossing a boundary. They would have normally been living in a cave or leper colony outside the village. The people of the village would have viewed lepers as unclean and dangerous because their disease was contagious. Yet here they are approaching Jesus as he enters the village. They dare to come out of their confinement in their desperation for healing. There is some **bold** behavior here!

As Luke writes this story, he wants to show **bold** behavior: People coming out of hiding to meet a man known to be a healer. Weak and powerless people reaching out and saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" The behavior is **bold**. It takes **bold** behavior to break down barriers.

In order to enter back into society, a leper would have to receive certification that he was "clean" by a priest in Jerusalem. So the nine go to the temple, as Jesus instructed them to, and on the way they see that their skin is healed. These nine do the traditional thing: they do what they are told, what is expected. These are the conventional lepers.

But the tenth leper is the really **bold** one. He "turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked" Jesus (a Jew), though *he* was a Samaritan. Jesus returns the man to a normal, healthy life when he says the words, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." It's a moment of transformation.

In order to be a growing, fruitful congregation, we need to be **bold**. Robert Schnase has outlined 5 practices for fruitful congregations. Churches have been studying these 5

practices all over the country. Last year we introduced these practices at a breakfast retreat, and that Sunday in August 2009, I preached about these practices—so some of you have heard of them by now. Just this past month some of our Church Council members have read a book about these 5 practices: **radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity.**

I'd like to share with you how I feel St. John's is implementing these **bold** and fruitful practices.

Last week on World Communion Sunday it felt like Pentecost to me. We had perhaps the most diverse congregation we've ever had in worship. There were Filipino people, Chinese people, Japanese, Fijian, African-American, biracial people—Thai and Hispanic, Chinese and European-American, someone from the Republic of Georgia, and a Russian person who grew up in France; we have Haitian people and hope they will be coming next week! And European-American people—people from Florida, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Arizona; people from Santa Rosa, Petaluma, Cotati, Rohnert Park, and Humboldt County and even from that very distant and different place, Southern California! I hope this means we are doing something right in terms of our hospitality. I hope people feel comfortable here. I hope we are willing to cross boundaries of race and ethnicity. Last week we had children in Sunday school and a new college student attending worship. I hope this means we are willing to cross boundaries of age and life style. This is a church where we are different in many ways, yet we are one in our faith in Jesus Christ. Like on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit allows us to speak the same language. When we extend invitation and welcome to all, this is "radical hospitality."

There have been times when I'd say our worship has been truly "passionate." If you were here last Christmas Eve, you remember the Holy Family at the manger: it was Jackie and Dan Whitright as Mary and Joseph with baby Evelyn as Jesus and little Julie as the angel hovering over the cradle. They moved around and smiled at one another, not like a still-life crèche, but like a real family. I was moved nearly to tears: this is how it was in Bethlehem long ago! Or maybe you remember last Palm Sunday when we celebrated Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with palm branches and glorious choral anthem, then the service moved into the reading of the Last Supper from Luke, and I lifted the bread and cup as I read directly from the Bible, and finally we read the passion story. Jesus was nailed to the cross, and the choir sang "Weep, Oh Mary, Weep." We stripped the altar and walked out in silence. When you get swept up in the mystery of our faith, that's when it's passionate worship. It might be a piece of music or a reading, or a prayer concern that touches your heart. It might be the feeling of not being alone in your sorrow or in your joy—that's "passionate worship." That's an encounter with God.

We have seen a swelling of "intentional faith development" this year. Thanks to generosity of giving and leadership, we have new adult and children's classes. We have a regular 9:00 am class for adults downstairs and a children's Sunday school program upstairs every Sunday. In Lent we started 5 spirituality groups to add to Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday classes. Soon we will start a Disciple Bible Study class, a beginning adult Bible class that introduces participants to the whole Bible in less than a year. Our Vision Team is going to

keep this intention of faith development before us, that we might continue to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

And the mission of the church is just that, "to make disciples of Jesus Christ"—but it goes on—"for the transformation of the world." Here is where "risk-taking mission and service" come in. Last year I saw St. John's assemble and give away 30 baskets of canned goods and a big check to Vida Nueva in honor of our 30th anniversary. This went to the low-income housing complex west of the freeway on the Expressway. And I have been proud of our volunteer who continues to support a family in need at COTS, the Committee on the Shelterless. I have admired the hard work of volunteers who have worked with NOAH (Neighbors Organized Against Hunger) week in and week out. And now through serving on the Board of Directors and negotiating a new location, these volunteers have just announced that NOAH will resume serving the hungry in November at Mountain Shadows School. I expect our "risk-taking mission and service" will continue and expand, as we live out our new vision, and "commit to social justice, outreach, and interfaith cooperation."

"Extravagant generosity" is the final feature of a fruitful congregation. We have people who are extravagantly generous here at St. John's. Some truly give sacrificially, that is, they give a percentage of their income such that their life style is impacted. They feel it. We have many people who give unselfishly and generously of their time. We have retired people and working people, who work long hours at the church, even in the evening and on weekends. We have dedicated church staff members who work for the love of the church, giving generously of their time and talent, even though they are paid only a little. We have choir singers and instrumentalists who practice and perform week after week for the love of God and this church. And we have people who care deeply about one another, such that they pray and prepare meals and write notes and make calls. This is "extravagant generosity."

We are a small congregation, but we are a fruitful congregation. Our fruitfulness will grow in the coming months, I am convinced. The spirit of God is here, breaking down barriers, trying new things, and welcoming new people.

We just need to be **bold**, like Jesus. We need to be willing to walk new territory. We need to be ready to meet new people. We need to take the daring step and trust that God's love is what people need when they are hurting. We must reach out to people. We need to help people see that their faith will make them well.

We just need to be **bold**, like the lepers. We need to come out and seek the light. We need to admit our need for God and for community. We need to admit our need for healing. We need to trust God and not be afraid.

Most of all, we need to be **bold** like the one leper, the one who returned to thank Jesus and praise God. Instead of following the conventional way, we need to be a bit outrageous in our thanks and praise. What if we were to do the equivalent of prostrating ourselves before Jesus?—Or in the Methodist way, we might say, what if we were to allow our hearts to be "strangely warmed," like happened to John Wesley when he was convinced beyond a doubt that God's love was for him, even for him?

You know, the nine lepers were **bold** about their need, but the sad thing is that though they got the healing they needed, they didn't come to know the healer. Though they experienced a miracle, they didn't come to know the miracle worker. And though they received the gift, they didn't come to know the giver (Edward F. Markquart, www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_where_are_the_other_nine.htm).

May we be **bold** in our praise, that we might not make that mistake.