

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23), Year C

Text: Luke 17:15-16

When one of them saw that he was healed, he came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself to the ground at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

Frank Selak, a Croatian music teacher, began his lucky or unlucky streak (depending on how you look at it) in 1962 on a train going from Sarajevo to Dubrovnik. The train inexplicably jumped the tracks and fell into an icy river killing 17 passengers. Frank managed to swim to the shore.

A year later while travelling on a plane, its door flew off and Frank was sucked out of the plane. He woke up in a hospital. He had fallen into a haystack.

Then in 1966, Frank was on a bus that went off the road and into a river. Four people were killed, but he suffered only minor injuries.

In 1970, his car caught on fire. He stopped it and got out just before the whole car blew up. In 1973 Frank was driving another car when a faulty fuel line sprayed petrol all over the engine and flames blew through the air vents. His only injury was the loss of most of his hair.

In '95 he was hit by a bus but only sustained minor injuries. Finally in 1996 he was driving on a mountain road when he went around a bend and saw a UN truck coming right at him. His Skoda went through a guardrail and he jumped out at the last minute and watched his car explode 100 metres below him.

In 2003, Frank bought a lottery ticket for the first time in 40 years at the age of 74. He ended up winning \$1 million. He had a much needed hip replacement, bought a big house and everything that a million dollars could buy in Croatia. In the end he gave it all away and went back to his small village and the simply lifestyle he had always been accustomed to. Frank Selak has been dubbed "the luckiest man alive". The other lesson to be learnt from this story is – don't get into any bus, train, plane or car with Frank Selak – he is the "unluckiest man to still be alive"

Luck is that indefinable and illusive thing that sometimes brings good fortune and sometimes doesn't. You might say the terrorist who didn't pay enough postage on a letter bomb experienced some bad luck. It came back with "Return to Sender" stamped on it. Forgetting it was the bomb; he opened it.

Have you said when you were almost run down crossing the street - "Boy, that was a lucky escape," or comment about someone's bad luck as one thing after another goes wrong.

Some people however, don't believe in luck. They say, "You get what you deserve". Everything that happens to us is a reward or a punishment for the amount of effort that is put in. If you work hard, invest a lot of time and energy into something, you will get back what you have put into it.

There are some who think that Christianity works this way. If you do good things, don't annoy other people, live respectable lives, pray (when you need help), believe in "someone up there", have your kids done (that is baptised) then you will live a happy and comfortable life.

On the other hand, those whose do evil and who live immoral lives can't expect to be happy and prosperous. After all, you get what you deserve!

This view of life runs into difficulty when good people suffer, or a slacker wins a lot of money.

Have you noted that up to this point I haven't mentioned God in this sermon? That's because the belief that we get what we deserve and that good and bad are the result of luck or coincidence, have nothing to do with God. There is no room for God who gives generously and excessively even though we don't deserve such abundance. The God of the Bible doesn't just give to good people or to people who in some way deserve to be treated better, he is gracious and generous to everyone whether they realise it or not.

The biblical concept of our heavenly Father giving us everything that we need, is absent from the thinking of many people these days. There is no thought given to what the Bible says about God being

- the supplier of our daily bread,
- the giver of our abilities,
- the provider of everything that we need to live happy and peaceful lives.

For many people God doesn't figure into how we are able to live so well every day. Rather they say,

- I get it because I deserve it;
- I am well to do because I have earned it;
- I get what I need because I have put in the hard hours working for it.

The Bible looks at things this way. It sees God right in the middle of everything that happens. It is stated again and again that

- God put me together inside my mother,
- God has given me my brain, my skills, and made me who I am,
- God is leading me,
- God is protecting me,
- God is supplying me with daily food,
- God heals me,
- God is guiding the rulers,
- God is helping his people,
- God sends the rain and provides the harvest.

In fact, everything is seen as coming from the generous hand of God. He doesn't give because people have deserved it, in fact, we see so often that he gives even when people are downright awful. Look how he provided daily food to the whining and faithless people of Israel when travelling to the Promised Land.

The Bible also says that we ought to recognise God's loving hand even when things aren't going well for us. Even though we can't see it at the time, be assured that God is not handing out what we deserve. Somehow, God will use the present trials to bring us blessing. Meanwhile in the midst of suffering we know that God is nearby, ready to help and support us until we come through to the other side.

When is the next big anniversary of this church? An anniversary is a great event. We could do a lot of chest beating and back patting and congratulating ourselves what a great job we have done here in this community. But when you read the history of the Lutheran Church from its early days it has been a struggle and at times the flame almost went out. We can only say in the end that in spite of the failings of the people, God is at the centre of what has happened here. God has provided the people, the resources, and the help. God has been the source of the wisdom, the faith, the commitment, and the right timing and the faithful realised this and gathered week after week to thank God for his leading.

We heard in the Gospel reading before the story of the ten lepers, who called out to Jesus for help and were healed. Only one returns. Only one can see that God is somehow involved in his restoration to health and returns to say thank you. And Jesus makes a point of it. "There were ten men who were healed," he says, "Where are the other nine?" And then Jesus commends the one who came back to say thanks because in expressing his gratitude he was recognising that not only was he healed, but who it was that had healed him. The ex-leper didn't know how it all happened, it wasn't just good luck and it certainly wasn't what he deserved, but he knew that somehow God had done something marvellous. He put God back into the centre of his thinking.

We put God back into the centre of our lives when we say at the end of hectic week, "Thank you God for helping me through this past week".

When we say grace before a meal, we put God back at the centre when we say, "Thank you God for this food".

We put God back at the centre when we say, "Thank you for the people you have placed in my life to love me and care for me – my family, my friends, and my church family".

When our good health is restored, we put God back in the centre when we thank him.

When the path through life is tough going and we don't know where it will lead us we put God back into the centre when we look at the cross, are reminded of his love for us and place our future in his hands.

When we are weighed with fear and the trouble that sickness and death bring, we put God at the centre who gives us hope for the future when we thank Him for his love.

In a way, we can say that we see the things, events and people in our lives in a different way to the rest of the world. We see that God in one way or the other is behind everything that happens.

God has been excessively generous to us. He has been generous for no other reason than to support and promote his work. Whether through a Lutheran World Service Appeal, or the offering plate to support mission work here and overseas, the training of workers for the church, or the work of the local congregation, God has made us rich so that we can richly bless others.

If, for you, things operate on a "you get what you deserve" principle, then you have no need to say thank you for anything.

If everything is purely luck and you are ready to deal with whatever luck brings, there is no need to say thank you, except "thank my lucky stars!"

However, if you see God as being in everything, generously pouring out his blessings, sometimes in ways that are easy to see, sometimes in ways that are difficult to see, then join with the Samaritan leper who saw himself as totally unworthy of receiving anything from Jesus at all and yet receiving so much.

He fell at Jesus' feet and thanked him for the new beginning and the restoration of his life. But this was more than just a healing of a man's body. Jesus said, "Get up and go; your faith has made you well." This healing has far wider implications. This one Samaritan leper saw the deep love of Jesus, the love that would take him to the cross; the leper saw in Jesus the love that saves.

This encounter with the love of God meant that this leper would never be the same. He truly was the luckiest man alive.

With faith in Jesus and trust in his love for us and with Jesus at the centre of our lives then you and I are the luckiest people on this planet.

Amen