

Stepping out in Faith—Taking Jesus as His Word

The Reverend Debbie Cook; Grace Church

Pentecost 20, Proper 23, Year C, RCL

October 14, 2007

Mother Teresa is one of the most well known of modern day saints (or saints-to-be).

Born of Albanian parents, and raised in what would be known as Macedonia, she became a nun at an early age and worked in India. In the late 1940's, she received a call from Christ to start a new ministry—one that would take her out the elementary school and into the streets of Calcutta. There she ministered to the dying, the abandoned, the poor, the forgotten. Others soon joined her, and the Missionaries of Charity was born, tending to the poorest of the poor all over the world.

Her words and her actions are often held up as an example of great faith in God. Surely, many thought, she must have a close and intimate relationship with our Lord; her perseverance and dedication was second to none. But a darker side of Mother Teresa is now coming to light—for over 40 years she struggled with her faith. All she felt was the absence of God; the intense pain of feeling unwanted, that somehow she had been abandoned by God. Her cries to God went unanswered, the silence was deafening. Even as she preached the power and certainty of God's love to others, often it failed to fill her soul.

Through it all, however, she remained faithful to her call. She never allowed the doubts that plagued her to deter her from the work of serving the poorest of the poor, treating even the most rejected with dignity and respect. She knew that while feelings of warmth and joy and inner peace could be wonderful things, they were not prerequisites in order to be the hands and heart and love of Christ to those who needed it most. She lived out her life in obedience, stepping out on faith that she often didn't feel. She took Jesus at his word, obeying his initial words to her to be among the poor and homeless in India.

The ten lepers of today's gospel also took Jesus at his word. They had no prior relationship with Jesus; as lepers, they were required to be separated from the rest of the

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community. Certainly, they must have heard of Jesus' healing miracles; of other lepers being healed, of Jesus' ministry among the outcasts and marginalized, how Jesus was willing to touch the untouchable. They did not question these accounts but took them at face value, spurring them to seek Jesus out when he traveled close by. And when Jesus sent them on their way, they went—trusting that the mercy they had asked for would be shown to them. They took Jesus at his word. Faith at its best, right? Yes...and no.

The entire verbal exchange between the lepers and Jesus' command seems to be an exercise of indirect communication and bold assumptions. After all, the lepers ask Jesus as Master 'to have mercy' on them. There is no direct plea for healing, no individual requests for a cure. They seem to leave the exact nature of that mercy up to Jesus, even while I am sure they had something specific in mind. Jesus' reply to them is equally as cryptic—for he tells them to show themselves to the priests. The priests are indeed the ones who could pronounce someone to be clean and to be restored to the community. However, nowhere does Jesus say that they are cured, or will be. The lepers seem to trust—or assume—that their need would be met. So off they go, obeying Jesus' command, without so much as a backward glance over their shoulders. We hear nothing of their outcome—except for one who turned back in praise and thanksgiving.

The whole encounter leaves many questions hanging in the air—what does it mean for God to show us mercy? What does it mean to 'step out in faith'? And is there a difference between the one who returned to thank Jesus, and the others?

Mercy can be a tricky thing to define—but often you recognize it best when you experience it. Mercy is woven into the very nature of love. It goes beyond mere passive pity; it spurs one to action. Mercy allows for acceptance, for redemption, for restoration. It does not

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demand reparations be made, it does not rely on benchmarks that must be met. God's mercy is shown throughout Scripture—humans turn away from God, and God calls to humankind with kindness and mercy. Every time God's people mess up, the response is always the same: "Come home", God says, "Come home to me. I love you, and even if you have wandered far and damaged yourself and our relationship, my love for you outweighs that." Again and again we see this dance in humankind's relationship with God. Even when the consequences of the people's actions come due, God in God's mercy does not abandon God's beloved people. This is the mercy that Jesus shows the lepers who call out to him—a mercy that seeks the well-being of God's creation, of God's children. It is this mercy that not only restores the lepers to health of body, but health of relationship, of community.

The lepers take Jesus' command as an offering of his mercy—and step out in faith. They act as if it were a done deal, with the expectation that their need would be met. They do not linger, waiting for proof that their disease was gone before undertaking their journey. They trust the words offered, trust the mercy given, trust God's purposes will be fulfilled in and for them. They freely accept this gift of radical love, seemingly without a second thought.

And therein lies the difference between the nine and the one who returned to Jesus' side. While the nine accepted (most likely joyfully) this cure of the leprosy and no doubt celebrated the fact that they could now return to their various communities—the one, the Samaritan, went a step farther. He returned to Jesus, praising God and giving thanks. He allowed his whole being to be affected by Jesus' action, healing him not just of his physical disease but restoring him to a reciprocal relationship with God. He did not just accept the gift given but returned it as well.

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While he stepped out in faith along with the others, he far outdistanced them in love. Our Samaritan took nothing for granted, not even the never-ending mercy of God.

In our busy, results-oriented world, we too often take God's mercy for granted. Those everyday miracles of love and friendship, laughter and kindness go over looked. We pray, and when the results line up with our expectations, we rejoice and move on, figuring that is how it is supposed to be. Like the nine who continued on their way, we can be in danger of allowing our relationship to God to be reduced to that of a consumer-vendor one. We forget that relationship is a process—one of reciprocity. Every time we turn to God, and allow God's mercy and love to change our inner-being as well as the outer, we open ourselves to be shaped and transformed by love. It is then that our true healing begins—as our Samaritan knew all too well.

But there are many times when that which we pray for most fervently for does not come to pass. The pain and frustration can be great, doubts may assault us and seek to pull us away from God. Like a four-year old child, we ask endless questions, many of them beginning with 'why': "Why me?" or "Why my loved one?" And when the answers don't come—or come in an unrecognizable way—we can become discouraged, angry, even bitter. We may assume God has ceased to care, that it all doesn't matter anyway. It is easier, we can conclude, to close ourselves off from God, rather than continue the relationship.

Mother Teresa knew this pain deep within her soul. She prayed for things that did not come to pass—and for many that did. The distance she felt from God at times was great; doubt plagued her for years. Yet through it all, she kept the lines of communication open, and lived her life as faithfully as she knew how. She stepped out in faith every day, taking Jesus at his word that we are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sick and the dying. Even when she

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did not feel the love of God, she lived it and by doing so, changed countless lives. Her life is a testament that the power of God can work through us, despite our feelings and our flaws.

So, let us step out in faith, and may God's mercy touch our souls—so that we in turn may touch others as well.

Amen.