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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Proper 23, Year C
2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

God's commitment comes first

When I was a child, probably eight or nine years old, a woman at my church told me a story about herself. She told me that when she was a teenager, and having a hard time of one kind or another, she would go to that church, during off-hours, and sit in the pews, in the worship space, to be alone with God. It was comforting, she said. When whatever else was going on in the turbulence of adolescent life, she would go and be with God.

I have never forgotten that. Partly it was thinking of an adult I knew being young, which seemed kind of impossible. (She was probably only in her 30s, but to a kid that may as well have been 60 or 90 or 120.) Partly I haven't forgotten it because it was such a generous self-disclosure. But mostly it was the image: this person I knew, struggling with this or that, and so sitting alone with God, who, she knew, loved her, no matter what.

It's a good story, an inspiring story. But there are two assumptions embedded in it that I want to bring to our attention this morning, two things of great importance that aren't stated outright.

The first is this: she knew, she could assume, that if she sought God in her need, God would be there. She knew that God would pick up the phone when she called. She knew that he would listen when she shared herself. She knew that God was there, and he loved her, all the time, no matter what the trials and tribulations were in the rest of her life.

This is a truth of the Jewish and Christian faith that is so foundational that we might not even notice how extraordinary it is. It isn't necessarily something held by all religions. It isn't necessarily something that has to be true, from first principles, for all people. But there it is: anyone, anywhere, in any situation, no matter what, can call on God and, as it were, receive his full and undivided attention. And not an indifferent, detached attention, either: we believe that God loves the world, and everything in it, and that he will be there for us: 8-year-olds, 30-year-olds, or 60 or 90 or 120. No matter what. She could assume this, but it says something very important about God that we shouldn't lose sight of.

That is this: we call this Sunday "Commitment Sunday." We call it that because we are making, or have made, our pledges to Christ through his Church for the next year, marking our commitment to him. So, Commitment Sunday.

This is a fine name and I support it. But I don't want us to lose sight of the fact that the real commitment, the commitment of everything, is made, with no reservation, by God first. God picks up the phone when we call, is there when we sit in the church by ourselves when things are tough, because he has already made a commitment to us. God is God-for-us: for our well-being, our flourishing, our health. His commitment to us comes before our commitment to him. His faith in us comes before our faith in him. As the first epistle of John says, God loved us first, and that's why we

love God, not the other way around. The real commitment is on God's part, whoever we are and whatever we do. God is already committed.

We can see that in the story from the Gospel of Luke today. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and comes across ten lepers. They call on him: "Jesus, Master!" And he heals them. As the story says, one of the lepers, "and he was a Samaritan," returned to Jesus and thanked him. That's good: it is good to thank people, including Jesus, for things. But let's not lose sight of the fact that Jesus couldn't have known for sure whether one leper would return, or ten, or none. His commitment to them and their well-being comes first, without regard to or foreknowledge of their response. And, indeed, the other nine continue to be healed, whether they come back or not. God gives, in abundance, with no regard to return. He doesn't take anything back.

And it has been this way with God forever. Every day is Commitment Sunday for him: from the foundation of the world, during the course of every human life, and into the unknowable future, eternally. He gives in abundance, because that is who he is: God's very nature is love, and he is committed.

This is what we give thanks for, God's abundant love, and one of the ways we do that is by returning to God a portion all that he has given us, which is everything: all things come of him, and of his own we have given him. He created all things, and he has given us so much. We give back but a small portion to show our gratitude.

Let me give you an illustration of what that is like. As some of you know, when my family and I first moved here, we didn't have a car. It is difficult to buy a car in a new state, because first you have to establish residency, and residency isn't easy to establish when you live in a rectory and don't have a lease or a mortgage. Luckily for us, a friend of ours offered to loan us her car for a few months as we got settled (which was very generous! Thank you, Susan!).

But what if, one day in February, she had called us and said, "Would it be okay if I borrowed the car for the weekend? I have something I need to do, something to move, and I'll get it back to you as soon as possible, and it would be a really big help." How would I respond? Of course you can, I would say. You're not borrowing it; it's yours! If I refused ... how could I have refused? The car had come from her, and I was extremely thankful; all I was doing was giving it back for a weekend so she could use it for her good purposes.

This is what we're doing with our offerings in 2020. Simply giving the car back for a few days, appreciating that we had been given it that long and would be given it longer still. How could we not? What jerks would we be if we refused?

These fractional commitments to God, which are our pledges for next year, pale next to God's absolute commitment to us: a commitment to the point of death. Christ on the cross is what true commitment looks like. God's commitment to us goes all the way down, without reservation, without mitigation, holding nothing back. His commitment goes down, even, into hell; even in the depths of hell, he stretches his hand out and invites us into the land of light and life. He was committed. All the time, no matter what. He does that for you and me, and he did for that woman in my church, when she was a teenager and, I imagine, beyond: when she went there, he was there. And he drew her close, and gave her his full and undivided attention as she sat quietly in the pews.

That is the second assumption of this story, by the way. The assumption is that there was a place to which she could go as a teenager in order to be with God. That is, there was a church there, one that she did not build, for which she as a teenager was not responsible, but there it was. Other people, coming before her, had given thanks to God and, in the process, built a place to which she could go. She didn't earn it, but it was there for her nonetheless. Other people's commitments—other people's thanksgivings—and given her that: a church, a place set aside, created by other people's offerings.

And I know—please, I know—that God is not limited to the confines of a church building. Many of us, including me, have come close to God in other places: in the beauty of the natural world, in intimacy with other people, in particular moments of birth or death in which God’s presence is felt particularly acutely. But there is only one place where the physical presence of God in Christ is made manifest: in the real presence in the Eucharist and in the gathered body of Christ. And, to receive the body and blood of Christ, in community with fellow Christians, requires a place set aside for it and, for most of us, that is a place that has been given to us, that we did not have to earn first. I hope we will take care of this church and give it on to those who will come after us, so that they can have a p.

But this issue of place, and the importance of having a place, is something else we see in the story of the lepers. The one leper went back to the source to offer thanks, to the physical presence of Christ. He didn’t have to, clearly. He could have gone wherever he wished: into nature, to his people, to do acts of charity. But he went, first, to Jesus, the source of his blessing. We can, and probably should, do all of those other things. But first we go to Jesus, the physical presence of Christ, and this place is where he is found.

Today is Commitment Sunday. If you have already made your pledge for the year to come, good job. Congratulations. You have shown your ongoing commitment to Christ and his church in thanksgiving for all you have been given, which is everything, and helped make sure that we can sustain this place for those who will come after us.

Maybe you have committed a tithe, ten percent, for the upcoming year, the Biblical mandate, or maybe that is an aspirational goal. That’s okay. I can tell you that it feels good to tithe: it feels the way it feels after you’ve written a sincere thank-you note to someone and let them know how you feel, told them how much you love them and appreciate them; a tithe feels like saying, “I love you, too.”

Or maybe you haven’t made a pledge yet, and are still discerning how best to show gratitude to God in that way. Or maybe pledging isn’t in the cards this year. I encourage you to consider it either way, but God offers his healing grace no matter what.

But, in whatever way your pledging shakes out this year, whatever or however you give or don’t, please know first and foremost the most important thing: that, no matter what, God is committed to you. God is God for you: for your well-being, your flourishing, your health. God is faithful to you, whether you’re the one leper or one of the other nine, 8 years old or 120 years old. God loves you first, no matter what, forever. He loved you from the very first, and he will love you at the very last.