

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
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I'm afraid that I'm going to have to talk about the Great British Bake Off again. You see, there's a new season, with new gastronomical and theological insights. If you don't know, the Great British Bake Off is a baking competition where twelve bakers make the most delicious cookies, cakes, and tarts to be judged and eventually either be eliminated or continue in the contest until one baker is chosen as the best. It's great fun to watch, and you kind of get to know the bakers and their different personalities while watching them create scrumptious desserts.

This season has a baker who I instantly disliked. His name is David. He is very handsome, athletic, and kind of uptight. He is a big fan of health foods and only drinks at weddings. He strikes me as someone who wouldn't be very fun at a party. I kind of get a grimace on my face whenever he comes on the screen. He has a trick though. He bakes simply and beautifully. While other contestants are imagining over the top confectionery shaped like dragons or filled with surprising colors and flavors, David almost always chooses the simplest and most elegant recipe. And you know what? He often wins. He takes the most pared-down, simple cake and bakes it perfectly with modest but also perfect adornment. Each of his creations is masterly. And I'm going to have to stop disliking him so much because I think it's possible he'll win the entire contest.

He was on my mind while I was writing this sermon for two reasons: one, I had the television on while I was writing, and two, I found today's Gospel lesson to be a bit like the cakes he makes — simple, unadorned, and perfect.

I think if you were to try to distill Christianity into a parable of just a few lines, I would be hard pressed to find something more perfect than today's lesson. Think about it: ten lepers, presumably from all over Judea, come to Jesus asking to be healed. He heals them, and then one returns to offer him thanks. Lo and behold, it is the Samaritan, and Jesus notes that this unexpected outsider is the one who seems to have understood something special about the nature of God.

Samaritans in the time of Jesus were ritually impure — they didn't worship at the right Temple, and they've let their beliefs drift from Jewish orthodoxy, and they had intermarried with foreigners. The mainline Jewish sects held them in contempt and would even go out of their way to avoid the lands where the Samaritans had their settlements.

And yet, this Samaritan is the vehicle by which Jesus chooses to demonstrate God's radical regard for the stranger. In this one, simple, sweet and perfect parable, we can see what it is to follow God.

In the book study in my office this week, we read a book called *Life of the Beloved*, and in it, the author writes what is basically a love letter to a friend who has no particular religious background. The author insists that the experience of being human is the experience of being

named Beloved by God — being searched and known intimately with all of our shortcomings and failures — and being loved anyway.

What weighty love. Is that the kind of healing that we are even prepared to bear? I think about all the times of self doubt or anxiety which threaten to separate the modern person from the message of love that comes straight from God. It seems like lots of our world is set up to attempt to deny the wonder and beauty of each human being, created in the image of God and loved for who we are.

In the story, the sick Samaritan takes the time to bow down and praise God for the gift of love and healing. And, really, that's what we're doing here this morning and every Sunday. We take the time to thank God in praise and worship for the love that we've been shown — even when we are outcast, even when we are sick in body or in mind or in heart, even when we are the wrong kind of person in the wrong kind of place. I'd even add that we praise God even when we royally mess up and find ourselves loved anyway. The ecstasy experienced by the Samaritan is the ecstasy of the Christian. It's what brings us to give our thanks and praise week after week.

And this is why our story this morning is so perfect. In it, we are the Samaritan who is praising Jesus for being made whole, even when the rest of the world wasn't doing anything to help.

I'm not sure about you, but I don't always feel whole. And, in fact, there are lots of forces in the world who are trying really hard to make us feel like we're not doing this life thing right. You should organize your drawers differently or better. You should raise your kids differently or better. You should dress, exercise, eat, love, marry, drive, stand, work, study, or entertain differently or better. Can you think of one headline that you have read in the last year that says anything like, "you are made well exactly as you are." You are Beloved simply for the fact of being alive and created in the image of God." That's not going to sell any newspapers.

And yet that's precisely what the Gospel and the church are saying this morning. You are important enough to Jesus that you have been noticed and named Beloved. And so our response is to praise. The message is so achingly simple — like a sublimely made cake with not too much decoration to hide its perfection. The Gospel this morning is sweet, is love, and is for you every day of your life. Entertain the radical notion that God loves you with delicious abandon, just as you are. And then live your life as if it's true. And always remember, God loves your neighbor in the same way and requires that we see their worth just as God sees ours. That's the way of this story, and that's the way of Christianity, small and perfect. Amen.