

“Debt of Gratitude”

Sermon – October 12, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

“Remember Jesus Christ!” That is the beginning of today’s epistle lessons from 2 Timothy 2:8. And after some discussion about what that means, Paul tells Timothy in verse 14 says, “Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.”

We see the divide in our country has deepened to a point where people of different political positions cannot even have discussion, let alone a civil one. Like me, you may lament this growing chasm and wonder if it will change and if so, how?

I wish I had the answers, but at least with fellow Christians we should be able to say “Remember Christ” and remind them what that means. As 2 Timothy discusses, it is not about dogma or doctrine, but the word of God.

Many will agree and tell us the whole verse 8: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel.” In other words, the focus being on the Resurrection and belief in that for our salvation.

While that is practically the definition of a Christian, it falls short of what it means to be a Christian. In fact, “Christian” was originally a derogatory term used by others. It meant “follower of Christ” but in a mocking way.

Remember Christ is the Greek word for the Jewish word Messiah, which means “the anointed one”. You can see saying, “followers of the ‘anointed one’” could sound mocking. Somewhat like when members of our more exuberant Protestant denominations are called “Holy Rollers.”

Originally, as mentioned three times in the book of Acts, followers of Jesus were called, people of “the Way”. And that in many ways is more descriptive.

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Jesus does say in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” But he also says in his teachings essentially, “follow my way.” In other words, do as I do.

One thing Jesus did was to help those in need. In today’s gospel lesson Jesus is in the border region of Galilee and Samaria. You will recall that the Samaritans were descendants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel that was conquered by Assyrians 700 years earlier. They had been forced to intermarry with foreigners and so were regarded as impure by the Southern Kingdom of Judah who ended up being called Jews.

What made it worse is that Samaritans continued to worship Yahweh, the same God as the Jews, though with completely different worship practices. This created great antipathy between the two peoples and they each did things to each other over the centuries to deepen that hatred.

In fact, the Jews regarded the Samaritans as enemies. Interestingly, though, they did not regard Gentiles as enemies necessarily. In fact, they call Cyrus the Great, “the messiah”, when the Persians conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. As we see among feuding Christians today, it is sometimes hardest to accept those whose intense disagreements with us conceal a much broader foundation of shared beliefs.

Luke contains the most references to Samaria and Samaritans, which continues in his book of Acts.

So, in today’s gospel lesson from Luke 17 Jesus sees 10 people called “lepers”, though they likely did not have leprosy as we know the disease today but was some other kind of infectious skin disease.

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Curiously, they call him “Jesus”, which only two other characters in Luke do so, the blind beggar and the penitent criminal. They also call Jesus, “Master”, something usually only reserved for disciples. Clearly, they know something about the man.

They call out, “Have mercy on us!” And Jesus simply tells them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” The implication that they will be healed and the priest can “certify” it so they can re-enter human society.

Note what Jesus doesn’t do. He doesn’t say, “Hey, you Judeans go on to the priest. You Samaritans go back to where you came from.”

Now while all are apparently healed, only one comes back and thanks Jesus. And he is a Samaritan.

Jesus wonders out loud why none of the others, which by inference were Judeans, came back except this “foreigner.”

The Greek word here for foreigner is *allogenes*. *allo* means other, *genes* means other genes, other biological identity. This is the only use of that word in the New Testament. But it would have been significant for the Judeans who were apparently following Jesus along the way.

The temple in Jerusalem had different sections of increasing exclusivity.

The outermost section was the court of the Gentiles. And on the post leading from there into the court of the women, was a sign saying “Any foreigner who enters here is guilty of his own death.” That was the degree of the alienation from the foreigners.

And yet, Jesus healed this foreigner. Furthermore, Jesus tells him to “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” But the word in Greek is *sózó*, which means “to save” and or “to redeem”. So, literally Jesus is saying, “your faith has saved you.”—to this Samaritan, this foreigner, this “enemy”.

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Note, like the other nine, he was already healed—physically. Jesus is now speaking spiritually. The King James Version says, “Your faith has made you whole.”

What did the foreigner do to deserve all this? His debt of gratitude. He praises God and thanks Jesus.

So, in Luke we go from the Sermon on the Plain, where Jesus says to “love your enemy” to the parable of the Good Samaritan where it is “to love your worst enemy as your neighbor” to today’s story that “your enemy is worthy of God’s love.”

Luke is building a case for indiscriminate love and radical inclusion.

Because at the core of this story is the extension of the benefits of the kingdom of God to those who are on the other side, to those who are “the other”. There is a progression in Luke-Acts of the extension of the blessings of the kingdom of God to Judeans, then Samaritans, then Gentiles, that is all peoples.

Today’s Old Testament passage from Jeremiah 29 reminds us that the Jews were foreigners in Babylon. And Jeremiah tells them on behalf of God to settle in for the long haul and make the best of it.

Except for the people who were here before Columbus arrived 533 years ago today, we were all foreigners, all seeking a better life, one of freedom, security, and opportunity. And to all who came before us so we could have what we do, we owe a debt of gratitude that we can repay by paying it forward.

Decrying the presence of foreigners in our midst leads us to miss a critical theological point. The foreigner can approach the grace of God in a particularly insightful way, a path of insight that may now be lost to many of us. The foreigner understands the sting of oppression. They

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understand the usually unavailing nostalgia that accompanies exile. They understand the rootlessness that characterizes the foreigner’s life. These are all experiences that shaped the story of Israel and its Messiah. Without them, the narrative of God’s action in this world is incomplete. The foreigner is a vital presence among us. The foreigner is a reminder of the pain of displacement many of us have felt in our own lives. The foreigner is a reminder that God’s promises know no boundaries or borders, that God’s grace will not abide by the arbitrary lines we draw between ourselves and others, that God consistently finds the most unlikely proclaimers of the good news as the best choice of all to announce God’s will.

Throughout the New Testament we see that Jesus and his immediate followers taught that the leading characteristic of Christian communication should be peaceful, constructive, and illuminating. Thus, as 2 Timothy says, we should “avoid wrangling over words”, which we can do by reading the words of Jesus and following his way of doing things.

It seems that for Paul, faith and love, as well as the grace that is in Christ Jesus are the keys to avoiding conflict and discord which can result in the ruination of the ones who listen. They can be a challenge to practice but that is the way to peace and understanding. And for that we owe God our debt of gratitude.

In the name of the God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.