**“The Good Life”**

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

October 9th, 2022

Travel back in time with me to the summer of 2021:

As the pandemic began to recede in the early summer months of 2021 and everyday life hinted at a new normal (remember the new vaccines had been introduced that Spring), I listened closely to how people in my congregation and community reflected on their experience of the previous 15 months or so. One of the most common themes I heard—and I realize this says a great deal about my socioeconomic context—*is that they never realized that another way of life was possible.*

Almost to a person, they vowed to try to negotiate with their employers a different type of schedule—one that freed them to work part of every week from home and that required much less overnight travel.

Options were now conceivable, negotiable, and doable that had been previously unimaginable. They talked as if a collective *treadmill* had been turned off and we were now free to move at a speed conducive to a different way of life. They spoke of being more in touch, more in sync, even more alive. In effect, they’d experienced a new way of being with others, with themselves, and with things in the world around them.

The point is that we are all *situated in* and *related to* the world—that is a given. What is not given is *how* we are situated, what kind of relationship we have with the world.

This is interesting because this week’s lectionary texts from Jeremiah 29, 2 Timothy 2 and Luke 17 all concern themselves with *living well—even in the midst of tremendous adversity and challenge.*

For example, Jeremiah writes to the survivors of the sacking of Jerusalem and deportation to Babylon. God spoke a word to them through Jeremiah, and God tells these people that *living well* looks like building full lives, even if they must live in a foreign land. Living well also looks like seeking and praying for the *shalom*, the peace and prosperity, of the city in which those exiled find themselves living. God tells these people, likely traumatized and homesick, that their *shalom*is now tied to the *shalom* of the city in which they live.

The author of 2 Timothy also writes about *living well*. Imprisoned and in chains, this author seeks well-being *not* in worldly comforts but in the salvation, he has found in Christ Jesus. The writer knows Timothy and his community suffer and struggle, even if they are not in chains themselves, and urges them not to take pride in worldly status but in truth.

And, in the healing story from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus talks about two kinds of living well. *First,* Jesus makes the ten men suffering from leprosy *“clean.”* For Jews in the first century, being clean meant *full participation in the life of the community.* One had to be ritually clean to participate in communal activities from worship to sharing a meal at a table. By making these men clean, Jesus not only restores their bodies from a debilitating and disfiguring disease, *but Jesus also restores them to their community.* This cleansing work truly deserves the praise given by the Samaritan (a double outcast)—the one who returned to thank Jesus. Yet only when he has returned does Jesus speak of true well-being.

*“Salvation,”* like the Hebrew word *shalom*, encompasses far more than physical health or ritual purity. *Shalom*means peace and prosperity, truly living well. Salvation isn’t just about life in the hereafter, as the epistle-writer knows, salvation empowers us to live well *now*.

In fact, in each passage, we meet people struggling and suffering: people in exile, people persecuted for their faith, people suffering from a terrible skin disease that excluded them from their community. And in each passage, God speaks a word of wholeness, a word of *shalom* and salvation, a word which empowers those listening truly to live well.

I am wondering this morning how *you* define *the good life—living well.*

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa believes that to live in late modernity in Western capitalist societies is to be caught up in an *accelerating way of life* that leaves us feeling that we must run faster and faster just to stay in place. What plagues late modern life is a way of being situated in the world that is oriented by a drive to make the world more available, accessible, useful, and controllable. We are continually seeking to expand our reach, and we live in fear that we will lose what we have already attained—as if we are on a down escalator and if we do not keep climbing, we will inevitably fall behind.

In her lovely and helpful book *"Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life,"* Tish Harrison Warren concludes with a chapter called *"Sabbath, Rest, and the Work of God,"* and these thoughts: *"What if Christians were known as a countercultural community of the well-rested -- people who embrace our limits with zest and even joy? ... In our workaholic, image-barraged, overcaffeinated, entertainment-addicted, and supercharged culture, creatureliness is a necessary and often overlooked part of discipleship. ... God wants to give us not just lives of holiness and prayer, but also of sufficient rest."*

So, what’s the solution to this state of affairs? Can the pandemic offer a real opportunity to re-think how we spend our time and enable us to live better, more fulfilled lives? And what role, if any, do communities of faith (like ours) have in promoting community wellness, living better?

Perhaps our text from Luke can help. The Greek word translated *“well”* in the NRSV is more often, and perhaps better, translated *“saved.”* Jesus cleanses ten men, but Jesus talks about only one being *saved* by his faith. Cleansing from leprosy, a disease of the skin, would have gone skin deep. Salvation enables the recipient to truly live well.

The Samaritan, to everyone’s surprise in the story, returns praising God to thank Jesus for the cleansing healing he received. Jesus declares his faith has saved him because Jesus knows the Samaritan man understands what God has done for him and has responded in the best way possible — *with thanks and praise.*

In other words, Jesus, through both word and direct action, *expands our understanding of what it means to be human.*

For example, in first-century Israel, priests not only diagnosed leprosy, but also declared a leper ritually unclean. By sending the ten to the priests, Jesus raised the possibility that they would not only be healed but also declared pure, which was essential if they were to reintegrate into society. The twist in the tale is that this particular leper colony was near a village on the border between Galilee and Samaria, communities that were acrimoniously divided. Jews considered all Samaritans ritually unclean and would travel miles out of their way to avoid having any contact with them.

Stigmatization, you see, is a great leveler: while they were ill the ten lepers had discovered that which side of the border you were from meant nothing if you had leprosy. These ten lepers had become *untouchables* and had forged their own community on the margins. But once they were healed, the old divisions kicked into play again. Ten were healed, but only nine would be accepted; the tenth would always be unclean because he was a Samaritan. He knew that barriers to joining society on the Galilean side of the border ran far deeper than leprosy. Perhaps that’s why he didn’t bother with the priests but turned back to find Jesus.

It was only to the Samaritan that Jesus said, *“Your faith has made you well.”* Maybe Jesus was talking about a different kind of *wellness.* Maybe he meant that *deep-seated human divisions* are a much more serious malady than even leprosy—that our souls can be far sicker than our bodies and yet most of us do nothing to heal the breach. Maybe he wasn’t commenting on the attitude of the nine who didn’t return as much as on *the system* that would accept them and reject the Samaritan.

We’ll never know exactly what Jesus meant. But the challenge to our concept of the gospel and faith and healing is that they are not merely gifts for the individual but bring consequences and responsibilities. Jesus healed with compassion and generosity, but he also drew people’s attention from their own problems to the bigger picture. *We are healed not to stay the same, but to live differently, breaking down divisions in society that exclude people because of their nationality, gender, religion, or education.*

Perhaps this is what it truly means to *live well.*

Episcopal theologian, Elisabeth Kincaid, asked, *“How do we witness to the redemptive action of God in the world?”* I would like to suggest that one very powerful way is by paying closer attention to how our individual and corporate actions affect others who are not like us, by paying serious attention to all calls for relief, and by not dismissing the experiences of others. If we can do this, the Grace of God will point us towards solutions to our current crisis [the pandemic] (and to future crises) that we cannot see by maintaining polarized views and discounting the needs of others.

Friends, the central element of all of our texts for today is the idea that at the root of our existence, at the heart of our being, there is not a silent, indifferent, or repulsive universe, dead matter, or blind mechanisms; *but a process of resonance and response;* someone who hears and sees us, and who finds ways and means to touch us and to respond, who breathes life into us in the first place.

It is in recognizing this reality, even in difficult circumstances, that we genuinely begin to live *a good life.*