

A Surprising Faith

Proper 23C | Psalm 66.1-12; 2 Timothy 2.8-15; Luke 17.11-19

When you're a child,
a wind up jack in the box
can provide a marvelous surprise.
Turn the crank around and around,
and pretty soon the top pops open
and good ole Jack pops right up.
Giggles and laughter abound!
Surprise!

As we get older surprises may not come as easily.
It doesn't take too long
to become a pretty good guesser
of birthday and Christmas presents.
A little shake, a gentle squeeze,
and you can tell whether that gift from Aunt Myrtle
is a book or a sweater or a package of boxers.
With a little more practice, you can even tell whether
the small box from your boyfriend
is a Mervyn's gift card . . . or a diamond ring.

As we get older, it may take more to surprise us.
Maybe the somber news of a doctor,
or a spouse telling you they want a divorce,
or a pink slip in a pay check or
a visit from the boss telling you
your position has been eliminated.
Surprise?!

Surprises can come in all different shapes and sizes.
In the 1880s, Dr. Charles W. Eliot
was the president of Harvard University.
In the spring of 1885, a humble-looking couple
from California showed up in his office.

The only reason he agreed to see them was because the man had recently been elected to the U.S. Senate. But, after all, California wasn't a very important state in those days.

The couple told Dr. Eliot that their only son had died of typhoid fever a year earlier. It had been his dream to attend Harvard University. They wanted to build some memorial to their son at the university.

What did you have in mind? Dr. Eliot asked.

The husband responded,

Is there a building which is needed?

Dr. Eliot sized them up as a kindly but naive couple.

He said, It costs a great deal of money to build what we need.

You may want to consider endowing a chair
in honor of your son.

I suggest that you go and talk to our academic dean.

The meeting was over. Dr. Eliot stood up.

But before leaving the president's office, the wife asked, How much would it cost to duplicate this entire university in another part of the United States and endow it so that students wouldn't have to pay tuition?

Eliot was astounded by the question.

After a moment, he said,

I suppose it would take \$5 million.

The husband and wife looked at each other and said,

Well, we could manage that, couldn't we?

Before Dr. Eliot could recover, the couple was gone.

Can you imagine how surprised Dr. Eliot was to find that a year later the couple had begun plans to start a university in that not so very important state in honor of their son?

The couple had donated their entire estate and another \$20 million to endow Leland Stanford Junior University.ⁱ
Surprise!

Perhaps our past experiences;
our ability to guess at the contents of holiday packages;
and our ever higher threshold for being surprised
by things that happen in this world causes us
to hear our readings from scripture today
without pausing a beat.
After all, what could really be surprising from the Bible?!

Our readings today remind us of something very important:

Faith in God through Jesus Christ
causes some surprising things to happen.

This surprising faith
drives us to our knees in worship and praise.
This surprising faith compels us to share
what God so freely and generously gives us first.

Our reading from 2 Timothy has something to say
about the nature of this surprising faith.
In the middle of this reading,
we have what scholars believe is
a quote from an early Christian hymn.
Listen again to what Paul writes,

*If we have died with Christ,
we will also live with him;
If we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he will also deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful –*

for he cannot deny himself.

2 Tim 2.11-13

Did the ending of that surprise you?

The rhythm of the first three stanzas would expect us to hear the hymn saying in its fourth and last stanza:

If we are faithless, God will reject our faithlessness.

But instead, it contains an astonishing reversal:

*If we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.*

v. 13

Surprise!

In the economy of this world,

we understand the notion of getting what we deserve.

We tend to like those who like us, and

to not hang out with those we don't like.

It would make sense to think that God works the same way.

And yet, our surprising faith says something different:

*If we are faithless, God remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.*

God continues to offer forgiveness and salvation

even when you and I are unfaithful. Why?

Because God cannot be untrue to his divine word

or unfaithful to himself.

Paul reminds us of this in his letter to the Romans:

*What if some were unfaithful?
Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?
By no means!*

Romans 3:3-4a

It is God's nature to love.

This passage from 2 Timothy reminds us that

God cannot deny his own nature as holy love.
For this reason he sent his Son as a ransom for all.
Even if we disbelieve,
God still keeps on offering to us this grace.
If we pretend that God is not,
it isn't possible for God to go along with our pretense.
When we are faithless to God,
the only effect that can have
is to once again underscore God's own faithfulness.ⁱⁱ

We may hear these words of Paul's and think,

*Hey, that's cool; I can do anything I want
and God's still gotta love me and be faithful to me.*

If we would think to take advantage of God this way,
it shows that this surprising faith hasn't captured our heart
or made a difference in our lives.
A better response from us would be
the example of the healed leper in Luke's Gospel.

In Luke 17, Jesus meets 10 lepers as he entered a village.
That Jesus encountered sick people who wanted healing
is not so surprising.
That Jesus healed the sick lepers who came to him
is not so surprising.
That one came back to say thank you –
now that's a little surprising,
since Jesus had instructed them
to present themselves to the priests.

That the one who came back was a Samaritan,
a "foreigner" – now there's a bigger surprise.
That a non-Jew would recognize in Jesus
something that would cause him to prostrate himself;

really, to worship Jesus as God; that's amazing!
And yet, this whole section of Luke's Gospel (17.11-19.27)
is full of such surprising faith examples:

Here, we have a leper, a Samaritan, and a foreigner
who recognizes Jesus as divine.

In 18.1-8 Jesus tells a story of a widow
whose persistence is a model of surprising faith.

In 18.9-14 Jesus tells the story of a tax collector who,
because of his repentance and humility,
is a model of surprising faith
compared to the example of the so-called
'religious' elders of the community.

In 18.15-17 infants and little children
are examples of this surprising faith,
as Jesus bids his followers to let them come to him.

In 18.35ff a blind beggar has better spiritual sight
than those around Jesus, for his surprising faith helps him trust
that Jesus will heal him of his blindness.

In 19.1-10 another tax collector,
the leader of the bunch named Zachaeus,
demonstrates a surprising faith by promising Jesus
he would restore the fortunes of those he'd defrauded
by donating half of his wealth and paying back four fold
those he's ripped off. Amazing!

So what are we to make of all of this?
What impact on our lives can we expect
this surprising faith to have for us?

Clearly, this surprising faith changes us.

The lives of the people Jesus touched didn't remain the same. Jesus met them where they were; he didn't expect the lepers to do anything before he healed them.

In fact, they weren't healed until they had already begun to go show themselves to the priests.

But neither was their healing conditional on what they did later; the nine who didn't return to give thanks to Jesus didn't come down with leprosy again.

They were still healed.

But once their lives were touched by Jesus, nothing was the same again.

Do we see that in our own lives as well?

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book, *Who Needs God*:

*Religion is not primarily a set of beliefs,
a collection of prayers or a series of rituals.
Religion is first and foremost a way of seeing.
It can't change the facts about the world we live in,
but it can change the way we see those facts,
and that in itself can often make a difference.*

Through the eyes of surprising faith,
we see that God acts first.

We also discover that our proper response to God's actions
is praise and thanksgiving.

God didn't tell the Israelites in Egypt,

"If you only had enough faith,

I would lead you to the promised land."

God led them out of slavery to Canaan.

And the people praised God on the banks of the Reed Sea.

God didn't tell us,
"If you only had enough faith,
I would send Jesus to suffer and die for your sins."
It was because we had no faith that he sent us Jesus.
As Paul writes in Romans 5:8:

*God proves his love for us
in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

God doesn't wait for us to have enough faith.
God acts first.
God's actions are to lead to a faithful response.
And even when our initial response isn't one of faith,
God remains faithful, because that is God's nature.

I think that Luther's explanation
to the first Article of the Apostles' Creed
captures the essence of this surprising faith
and our proper response. Luther writes,

*I believe that God has created me and all that exists.
God has given me and still preserves
my body and soul with all their powers.
God provides me with food and clothing,
home and family, daily work,
and all I need from day to day.
God also protects me in time of danger
and guards me from every evil.
All this God does out of fatherly and divine
goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it.
Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise,
serve and obey God.*

All people have been created by God.
Many people (and most Americans) have food and clothing,

home and family, daily work, and all that they need from day to day.

I believe that God protects many people, believers and non-believers alike,

in times of danger and guards them from evil.

None of us deserves this,

yet God's "fatherly and divine goodness and mercy" touches many, many people.

How are believers different from the rest of humanity?

We are like the one leper.

We recognize God's hand in the good that we have.

We respond with thanks and praise to God through Jesus.

We respond by serving and obeying God through Jesus.

The rest of the world may be like the nine lepers.

They have been graced by God in many ways,

but they don't recognize the source of such blessings.

They don't offer the proper thanks and praise through Jesus.

Perhaps we might think about it this way:

It happened one day that a farmer from the country was in town to do some business.

He stopped at a drive-in restaurant to get a bit to eat.

As was his custom, before he ate,

he bowed his head and gave a word of thanks to God.

There were some others in the restaurant

whose manners weren't quite so refined.

They saw him praying, so in jest they asked him,

"Does everybody where you're from pray before eating?"

The farmer looked up and said, "Nope.

There are some who don't.

We call them pigs and they just dig right in."ⁱⁱⁱ

At the end of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan ex-leper, Jesus told him,

*Get up and go on your way;
your faith has made you well.*

Luke 17.19

"Made you well" is a rather weak translation;
better it seems to me is

your faith has saved you.

Salvation for the Samaritan meant that his life was changed.
It was not something he did for himself,
but it was a miracle that came from God.
His focus, his seeing, his perspective was forever changed.

Salvation for us means that our lives are changed.
It is not something that we do for ourselves,
but it is a miracle that comes from God.
Our focus, our seeing, our perspective is forever changed.
You and I are called to live out that change
with lives of service and obedience to God.

Amen

ⁱ Jim Jackson, *Treating People Right*, Chapelwood Chimes, 26 January 1996;
Downloaded from *Homiletics Online* October 13, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Oden, T. C.. *First and Second Timothy and Titus*. Interpretation, a Bible
Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: J. Knox Press, 1989), 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ As recorded in *Gospel Notes for Next Sunday* by Rev. Brian Stoffregen.