**NONE RETURNED**

Last week in the Emotionally Healthy Relationships course, we worked on our genograms. If you don’t know what that is, it’s an exercise to chart the emotional processes in our family. You begin by creating a family tree, then chart the interactions between them. If there was conflict between family members you note that; if there was distance between family members you note that; and so forth. It’s supposed to help us uncover our motivations for the things we do.

This is an exercise I’ve done several times over the years. This story we have in front of us today reminds of a story from my family. My mother was the youngest of five children born William Swain Ward and Letitia Hitchcock Ward. The oldest child was a man named Hardin Ward, but nobody in our family called him that- we referred to him as Uncle Boo. One day when Boo was a teenager, my Grandfather received a call from the county sheriff. It seems that Boo had been detained down at the local railyard. He was running away from home and had been detained attempting to hop on a freight car. The sheriff asked if my grandfather wanted him to bring Boo home. My Grandfather thought about that for a moment, and said no. He asked the sheriff to release Boo, but let him decide whether or not he wanted to come home.

Boo chose not to return. He did hop on a freight car, and he rode the rails for about a year. He did eventually return home and nothing else was said. He went on to graduate from High School, find a job with the TVA, and lead a good life.

I wonder how I would have reacted if that had happened with one of my children. What would I have said if one of my children left? Certainly, I would have been frightened. I suppose I might have been angry. But in this story, Jesus’ response appears to be one of wonderment.

In this story, ten lepers come to be healed. He tells them to go show themselves to the priest as the law requires. The scripture says that as they were on their way they were healed. One of them turned back, and Jesus expresses wonder. “Were there not ten of you? But where are the other nine?”

It strikes me that this story comes to the heart of the matter for many of us. It describes, more than any other passage, our problem with our relationship to the divine. I want you to think back to your earliest memories of what you were taught about God. I’d be willing to bet that the first thing that most of you were taught about God was that God loves you. Certainly, if you have spent any time in church over the years, you will have heard this many times.

Speaking for myself, I’ve never had much doubt about the veracity of this statement. The love of God has been shown to me more times and in more ways than I can count I take that love for granted. It’s like a favorite blanket. It’s always there when I need it.

What lies in doubt is my reaction to that love. I often don’t stop to consider that love. As I said that love is always there when I need it. When I don’t need it lies rumpled up in the corner, unnoticed and unconsidered until I need it again.

Next week I will be at Jubilee. I have been asked to give the talk on grace and faith. I’m not going to give you that talk here, but I will tell you that I will use this passage as one of my illustrations. This story shows us both sides of the equation. The ten lepers come seeking God’s grace and they receive it. One person acts in faith to follow Jesus.

Each one of us has a story to tell. Your story might be a pleasant one. Your story might be awful. For most of us, our stories lie somewhere in between those two extremes. The question is, when god blesses you what do you with it? Do you return to serve God or do you return?

There could be any number of reasons why these nine men didn’t return. Maybe they were so excited that they ran off to tell their friends and family about it. Maybe they intended to return and just got busy. Maybe it just slipped their mind. Maybe they felt that it was no more than they deserved. After all, those men were Jews. They were members of God’s chosen nation. It was God’s job to heal them- or so they thought. Or there may have been other reasons. What we know for sure is that among the Jews who were healed that day, none returned.

But the Samaritan who expected nothing, wanted nothing more than to come back and praise God. It’s because of that he is proclaimed a person of faith.

Let’s get something straight. God owes us nothing. There’s nothing that God is required to give us. If God blesses us, it’s a gift of grace. Yet, I wonder. If we were blessed by God that way, how many of us would return? Would the epitaph of the church be, “None returned”

The good news is it’s not too late. Jesus is still waiting for us to return. You have a choice. It’s a possible for a person to come to church their whole lives, be active in everything the church does, and still not follow Jesus. Following Jesus is an option, but we have to turn back. We can’t just go to our lives and forget about God. We have to turn back, we have to return, if we want to follow Jesus. If we want to follow Jesus in faith, we have to go to where he is. We can’t go out in our lives and expect Jesus to show only when we think we need him.