Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 23—Year C
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Psalm 66:1-11
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

I read an article on NPR this past Wednesday that really caught my eye—Personalities don't usually change quickly but they may have during the pandemic--NPR--10-05-22.[1] It's about a study authored by Angelina Sutin, an assistant professor of behavioral sciences and social medicine at the Florida State University College of Medicine, which is trying to understand how the pandemic has impacted our personalities. The study looks at The Big Five inventory that measures five different dimensions of personality: neuroticism (stress), extroversion (connecting with others), openness (creative thinking), agreeableness (being trusting), and conscientiousness (being organized, disciplined and responsible). While these traits don't typically change radically throughout a lifetime, there's a general trend for young people to see a *decrease* in neuroticism as they mature, and an *increase* in agreeableness and conscientiousness.

In the first year of the pandemic, the researchers found a decrease in neuroticism, the personality trait associated with stress and negative emotions, which was a rather surprising finding. They wondered if they would find different personality changes in the second and third years of the pandemic, and they sure did. In 2021 and 2022, the researchers found that extroversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness all *declined* across the population, but especially for younger adults, who also showed an *increase* in neuroticism. Those of you who teach young adults know this better than most.

Study author Sutin notes: *"The first year [of the pandemic] there was this real coming together. But in the second year, with all of that support falling away and then the open hostility and social upheaval around restrictions...all the collective good will that we had, we lost, and that might have been very significant for personality."*

The article also notes that there are other societal shifts and reckonings that have happened these last few years that also might contribute to this—shifts in how we work and go to school, the racial reckoning, increased economic stratefication, the events of January 6th, and we might add increasingly intense impacts from climate change.

So, our capacity to connect with others, be open and think creatively, trust, and be organized, disciplined, and responsible have all taken a hit, even more so for our young adults, and they get an extra helping of stress on top.

But remember, these changes are across ALL populations—this has hit all of us.

I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with colleagues and other leaders across the wider community recently that bear out what so many of us are noticing—**we're not well as a society**. Reactivity is higher; patience is thinner; words are harsher; elbows are sharper; much more "me" and much less "we." I have a friend who said to me recently, "You can even see it how people are driving around town."

And so, we hear **Jeremiah** this morning. He's still **in Jerusalem, and he's sending a letter to the elders and priests and prophets and all the people who've been dragged into exile in Babylon**. He's got a **word for them from the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce; marry, have children, put down roots; multiply there, and do**

not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

There is no question that these last years with all the disruptions and fraying of our social fabric have been an exile of sorts, a strange time with a lot of rearranging of everything that used to feel familiar. Today, God is saying to those exiled long ago, and to us, ***"There ain't no going back to what was before. Put down roots in this strange new land. Get on with building and planting. Don't hunker down, but expand your sense of family. Even more, expand your sense of responsibility for this strange new land—seek its welfare; pray on its behalf; and never forget, your welfare is all tied up with the welfare of everyone else who is living in this new normal."***

These last few years have drawn us inward with much more concern for our immediate circles, but today, God, through Jeremiah, is calling us to lift our eyes and orient ourselves outward with concern for all the others with whom we share this world.

And then we get the story from **Luke**. **Jesus is traveling the region between Galilee and Samaria**—that's a no man's land to be sure. **As he enters a village, ten lepers approach him. They know better than to get too close and keep their distance. They call out to Jesus for mercy. He tells them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made *clean*.**

Then one of them, when he saw that he was *healed*, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a *Samaritan*. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made *clean*? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you *well*."

Leprosy was a completely isolating experience; it separated you from community. And I'm guessing that that one Samaritan experienced being separated, even among the lepers. That resonates with what the pandemic did to so many people and communities—everyone experienced the separation, and some got hit doubly hard.

And there are three different words in this passage, both in the English and in the Greek, that feel similar but that are so very different—**being made clean, being healed, being made well**. For the nine, when they got ***cleansed***, as quick as they could, they wanted to get back to their lives and pick up where they left off.

But the Samaritan, as one doubly despised, as one intimately acquainted with separation and hardship, he understood that this ***cleansing*** had massive implications for being restored to **community**, and so he **returned to Jesus and fell down at his feet and thanked him**. The Samaritan understood that there was something much deeper and needed and granted than being made *clean*; there was something that needed to be, and was, *healed*. And seeing that deeper *healing*, that deeper reweaving of community now made possible, Jesus could say to him, you've been made *well*, and the Greek word for that is σῴζω, *whole*, you've been made *whole*.

These last years have been hard on everyone, and they've been even harder on some than others. As things are shifting and things feel more "normal," it's tempting to just get on with picking back up with our lives.

But are we missing a deeper invitation if we settle for this? Are we missing something if we settle for being made clean and getting back to our life?

What if Jesus is saying, ***"I'm setting you free and reweaving you into community. I'm calling you into those spaces that have been doubly despised. I'm calling you to set your sights on the welfare of this whole strange new land that you inhabit. I'm longing for you to be agents of healing in all these places and spaces that have taken a hit; I'm empowering you to repair the breaches that have opened up everywhere. This is about so much more than being made clean; it's about acknowledging all that needs to be, and can be, healed through me through you. It's about not settling for being made clean when I want everyone and everything to be made whole."***

So, circling back to those five dimensions of personality…How do we, as individuals and as a church, focus on increasing our connection to others? How do we stay open and curious and grow our capacity to think creatively amidst such challenging times? How do we turn away from cynicism and bravely trust? How do become more accountable to others, take more responsibility for ourselves, and exercise discipline in a world that struggles to show restraint in anything? And how do we continue to live from a place of hope amidst the steady siren call of stress and negativity?

How do we structure our practices to grow all of these capacities? And as we **heal** in these dimensions, how do we **build** this healing in others who are struggling? How do we **plant** this healing in places that so need it? How do weave this healing for the **welfare** of the world?

And how do we give special attention to those for whom these last years have been doubly hard—young adults, people of color, the poor, those devasted by floods and wildfires and hurricanes, refugees of war, those who have felt at risk because of their gender or sexuality, those faced with hard choices, and those especially sensitive to the pain of the world? How do extend the healing Jesus offers to all of these so that we all may be **made well**?

We aren't well these days, but that's not what Jesus longs for us. He doesn't want us to get back to normal; he wants us to experience and share the healing for which our world is groaning. He wants us to knit back together his broken body and reweave the bonds of community that have become so frayed. ***We aren't well, but Jesus believes we can be.*** Don't settle for **being made clean** when Jesus is offering to **make us whole**. Amen.

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[1] Personalities don't usually change quickly but they may have during the pandemic--NPR--10-05-22 by Maggie Mertens.