

Rev. Lisa Kipp, Lutheran World Relief
Sunday, October 12, 2025
St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA
Luke 17:11-19

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is a joy to be with you this morning. Thank you for your warm welcome and even more, for your partnership in ministry through Lutheran World Relief. I'm deeply grateful for the chance to worship with you and to share how your love and generosity are reaching neighbors around the world in Jesus' name.

Lutheran World Relief has been walking alongside our global neighbors for 80 years, responding to poverty, disasters, and displacement. We were founded by Lutherans who, in the wake of World War II, couldn't ignore the suffering of refugees across Europe. They gathered quilts, soap, clothing, and prayers, and in doing so, began a ministry of mercy that continues to this day. For eight decades, the love of Lutherans in the U.S. has stretched across borders, bringing hope to people we will likely never meet but to whom we are deeply connected.

When we step into today's Gospel, we meet people who have lost every connection that once gave them life. Jesus is traveling the borderland between Galilee and Samaria, a no-man's-land, a space between. As he enters a village, ten people approach him. They live on the outskirts, cut off from their families and their communities. "Jesus," they call out, "have mercy on us!"

And before they are healed, before they even take a step toward the priests, Jesus sees them. He doesn't turn away. He doesn't keep walking. Jesus sees them. For any of you who have ever felt unseen, for those of you who have wondered if your pain or your prayers even register, this story begins with 3 important words: *Jesus saw them*. Not as outcasts. Not as problems. But as people. Sometimes that is where the mercy of God begins – in being seen, fully and tenderly, by the One who never looks away.

Jesus tells the people who approach him to go and show themselves to the priests, and as they go, they are made clean. But one (just one) notices what has happened. He turns back, praising God, and falls at Jesus' feet in gratitude. And Luke adds this small but stunning detail: *he was a Samaritan*. And that detail changes everything. The one who returns is a foreigner, an outsider, someone who did not belong. Yet he becomes the model of faith and gratitude.

Luke loves to surprise us with Samaritans. Remember the Good Samaritan, the one who shows mercy when others walk by? In that story, the Samaritan embodies love for neighbor. Here, another Samaritan embodies love for God. And together they fulfill the great commandment: love of God and love of neighbor.

Through both stories, Luke invites us to see that God's grace doesn't stay within our boundaries. The people we might consider "other" are often the ones who see and trust God's mercy most clearly.

Theologian Eric Barretto puts it this way: "The foreigner can approach the grace of God in a particularly insightful way ... [she] understands the sting of oppression ... the nostalgia that accompanies exile... The foreigner is a reminder of the pain of displacement many of us have felt."

Those words linger with me, because so much of the world's pain echoes that same experience — exile, displacement, and the longing for home. And yet, in those very places, I have seen faith and gratitude that shine with astonishing clarity.

For several years now, many of our neighbors from Ukraine have been displaced and longing for the home they once knew. In the early days of the war, my colleagues met a young woman Nadia Agarkova in western Ukraine. When the war began, she fled with her two-year-old son, Kyrlo, in search of safety and found refuge in a Lutheran World Relief-supported center.

When Nadia arrived, she was given a warm meal, a safe place to sleep, an LWR quilt and a Personal Care Kit. Just simple things: soap, a towel, a toothbrush, a handmade blanket. But when my colleague explained where the quilt and generosity came from, that the quilt had been sewn and prayed over by people in the United States who blessed it and prayed for whoever would receive it, Nadia began to weep.

My colleague told us, "If you can imagine the highest level of gratitude and appreciation, that is what people were feeling. It wasn't about the gift itself, but about the genuine care behind it — the kind of gratitude that frees your spirit and brings true happiness to your heart."

Gratitude that frees your spirit. Joy that wells up even in chaos. Faith that sees the gift and recognizes the giver. Ten lepers were healed on the day that the gospel of Luke highlights, but only one truly saw the mercy, saw the grace, saw that this healing was about more than skin. And that vision changed everything.

Faith begins with seeing, not just believing certain ideas about God, but recognizing God's presence right in front of us. All ten were made clean, but only one was made *whole*. Jesus

says, “Your faith has made you well.” Faith, it turns out, is not simply about being fixed; it’s about being found. It’s about seeing grace where the world sees only distance and disconnection.

Through Lutheran World Relief, I see that kind of faith again and again. In faith communities like this one that long to make a difference in the world, and in communities far from here, where people who could easily feel forgotten discover that they are not alone.

Nyaluit Chuol, a young mother in South Sudan, is among neighbors who are often forgotten by the world. You see, Nyaluit has been running for her life ever since she can remember. When her husband was killed in South Sudan’s ongoing civil war, she wasn’t sure how she could go on, with all the challenges mounting against her.

For 4 years in a row, the rainy season had brought massive floods that never subsided. Two-thirds of the country was covered by water. There was nowhere left for cattle to graze. Nowhere for families to plant gardens.

Nyaluit’s village ran out of food. The young widow had no choice but to pack up her 5 children and search for a new place to live. For six days the family walked, being chased by violent tribes and carrying nothing but each other.

After a journey of nearly 70 miles, they finally arrived at a displacement camp. Here, they found food, shelter and refuge — but Nyaluit’s challenges weren’t over. Two of her babies, 4-year-old Nyayien and 2-year-old Mar, became gravely ill with measles.

Fortunately, thanks to the generosity of people like you, Lutheran World Relief runs a medical clinic at the camp. Health workers stabilized the children, but they were severely malnourished and needed advanced treatment.

The problem? The larger hospital is only accessible by boat. Nyaluit’s heart sank. She’d walked this far to save her children. Would they die because she didn’t have a canoe?

And then she learned the camp had a motorboat, purchased by caring congregations like yours. The boat carries medical supplies between camps and serves as an ambulance in emergencies — cutting the five-hour canoe trip down to one hour.

Nyayien and Mar arrived at the hospital just in time. Their journey is far from over, but today they are healthy and strong.

Stories like Nyaluit’s remind us why the ministry of LWR exists. When people of faith refuse to turn away from suffering, when we choose compassion over indifference, lives are changed. Sometimes even saved.

This year, Lutheran World Relief celebrates its 80th anniversary: eighty years of going to places others don't go, to the front lines of war and to places even cars can't reach. Eighty years of ordinary people, like you and me, responding to God's extraordinary grace.

Through every decade, from postwar Europe to South Sudan, from refugee camps to flood zones, one thing has remained constant: God's people turning back in gratitude and then going forward in faith.

Because gratitude isn't the end of the story. It's the beginning of the next one. Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way." Healing leads to sending. Gratitude leads to action. That's what you are part of: a movement of mercy that continues to turn back in praise and then go forward in love.

Last week Pastor Nelson's sermon ended with these words: "...with faith we can accomplish amazing things ... With faith we can do as we are called. With faith we can live righteously, live in the healthy and connected ways that God wants us to live. With faith we can bring about the righteous kingdom, God's kin-dom. With faith we can rest in God's love for us. And with faith we can dare to believe in God's love for the world."

Dear friends in Christ, when we partner together, your faith joined with the work of Lutheran World Relief becomes part of how God's love is made visible in the world. Together, we live out that faith and make a difference that reaches far beyond what any one congregation could do alone.

Faith, at its heart, is about *seeing*.

Seeing grace that others overlook.

Seeing the image of God in the face of a stranger.

Seeing that the lines we draw around "us" and "them" are not the lines God draws.

The foreigner, the refugee, the outsider — they are not at the edge of God's story. They stand right at its center.

So as people who are seen by Jesus, may you also be people who see.

People who turn back in gratitude.

People who go across boundaries, across borders, across fears to join in what God is already doing to heal this world.

And as you go, may you hear the same words Jesus spoke to that grateful Samaritan: "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Amen.