

Living a Life of Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Are there certain Bible stories that you just like better than others, ones that you seem to resonate with or gravitate toward more than others? Strangely enough, today's gospel reading, often called the story of the Ten Lepers, is one of those stories for me. I'm not completely sure why. Maybe it's because it's a story that poignantly demonstrates Jesus' compassion and mercy; or because of God's power to bring healing and wholeness (in this case to those who have been isolated and ostracized by society and the religious establishment); or because it witnesses to the crucial relationship between faith and gratitude.

Concerning this last point, let me ask each of you: **What and whom are you grateful for? Do the words "thank you" roll easily and often off your lips?** How easy is it for you to express appreciation?

On the flip side of that, how often do you hear words of gratitude and appreciation from others? Like from those in your biological or chosen family? Those whom you consider to be your friends? Those with whom you work, or go to school, or attend church?

The need for each one of us to feel appreciated is a necessary part of the human condition. Also, there is great psychological, physiological, emotional, and spiritual value in the activity of giving thanks, showing appreciation, and expressing gratitude.

So why do you suppose we find it so hard sometimes to say "thank you"? **Has gratitude become a neglected virtue?** Well if it has, it's been that way for a long, long time, as today's gospel text from Luke 17 attests.

Luke tells us that Jesus was traveling through the region between Samaria and Galilee. We learn that ten men, suffering from the disease of leprosy, which could have been any number of skin diseases, approach Jesus. They stand far off, as was in accordance with Jewish law. They cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Notice, however, that this is different from what the Levitical law required, which was to shout, "Unclean, unclean." Their words express, then, not a warning to Jesus but rather a cry to him for help – perhaps a desire for relationship.

Next we're told that Jesus, "saw them." It's easy to skip right over this small, seeming unimportant statement because it's obvious that Jesus saw them. The Greek verb "to see," however, carried deep theological meaning for Luke, well beyond its literal meaning of just physical sight. **To "see" also meant to perceive and understand.** In this case, Jesus perceived that people were in need, and he understood that he had an opportunity to do something about it.

Later on, Luke tells us that "one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice" (v. 15). In this instance, "seeing" meant that the man not only realized he had been healed physically (as the others certainly

must have realized as well), but more importantly this one particular person recognized that his life had been touched by God's mercy and grace.

We are presented, then, with a challenge. **How well do you and I “see”?** And I don't mean with our eyes. Seeing like Jesus means **recognizing the needs of others, and then responding to them.** The other kind of seeing, like by the healed leprous man, means to **recognize not only healing and wholeness itself, but also that it is by and through the work and grace of God.** “Seeing,” means being able to recognize God's blessings and grace in our lives.

This gets to the very heart of the story. **How do you and I respond when we recognize God's mercy and grace in our lives?** Alan Culpepper, writing in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Luke states:

Gratitude may be the purest measure of one's character and spiritual condition. The absence of the ability to be grateful reveals self-centeredness or the attitude that I deserve more than I ever get, so I do not need to be grateful.

The tough question we are faced with, then, is this: **Are you and I always grateful for the blessings and grace, the healing and wholeness, that we are able to recognize in our own lives, and in the life of this congregation?** In fact, is being grateful a quality that others would say describes your character?

In this biblical story, with its profound connection between faith and gratitude, you may have noticed however, that it has an interesting twist. The one who turned back to give thanks wasn't Jewish, like Jesus, but a Samaritan. You may recall that Samaritans were despised by the Jews. There were severe racial, social, and religious divisions and boundaries between them. Therefore, **it's very important to observe how uninterested Jesus seems to be in that man's religion.** We know only that he is a Samaritan. We do not know what his theology or moral values are – whether he is pro-choice or pro-life, how he votes or spends his Sabbath or his money.

The inclusive grace that is extended to this outsider is reflected in a hymn you are most likely familiar with, “There's a Wideness In God's Mercy.” **Jesus provides a living example to us as to the inclusive wideness of those to whom we are called to reach out to and minister.**

Yet, Jesus asks the thankful Samaritan, the outcast among outcasts, “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?” (v. 17-18). What does the failure of the other nine to return and praise God say about them? What does it say about faith?

This story encourages us to regard gratitude itself as an expression of faith. For Jesus' final comment to the healed Samaritan is, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” I realize that passages like this have done as much harm as good, but I'm not going to go into that today. Instead, I just want to mention that **the Greek word translated as “made well” or “healed” also carries with it the connotation of something much deeper - salvation.** And that's not a reference to heaven and hell.

As an unapologetically progressive Christian, the theological term ‘salvation’ is one we need to reclaim, rescuing it from the limited meaning assigned to it by fundamentalists. This verse, in other words, comes with the added meaning, “your faith, as expressed in your act of gratitude and praise of God, has saved you – in the here and now!” That transformation is available to each and every one of us.

The other nine men had been healed *physically*, but only the one who returned to express gratitude and praise God received the *spiritual* dimension of Jesus' declaration of salvation. In other words, **there is something life giving about gratitude.**

Ironically, this biblical story about an outcast, unclean, heretic (according to ancient Jewish standards) becomes a model of faith for us. **He was able to see beyond his healing to the One who made him whole - to God. He recognized not only the gift, but the Giver of the gift as well.**

Interestingly, there's not a religion or type of spirituality anywhere in the world that doesn't include gratitude as a vital part of it's path to wholeness and well-being – to salvation. Decades before Jesus was even born, a Roman philosopher and great orator named Cicero stated, **"A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, it is the parent of all virtues."**

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *Reflections on the Psalms*, "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most: while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. **Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.**" And I want to leave you with another reflection from Alan Culpepper:

Here is a barometer of spiritual health: If gratitude is so synonymous with faith, neither response to God is separable from the other. Faith, like gratitude, is our response to the grace of God as we have experienced it.

For those who have become aware of God's grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper.

What, then, is the measure of gratitude on your barometer of spiritual health? Like the Samaritan with leprosy, may we all be more intentional to pause, to recognize our blessings and the ways we experience healing and wholeness, and then remember to **respond with gratitude.** To which I want to take this occasion to say how thankful I am to God, and to you, for the opportunity to be your pastor.

Amen.