

“The Importance of Gratitude”

Luke 17:11-19

November 21, 2021

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“And only one returned to give thanks?”

Luke 17:18

Prayer of Preparation

In the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermon Message

One of the things about living in different countries is learning different customs. For example, when we greet and welcome each other in this country, we typically say, “Hi, how are you?” To which we respond, “I am fine, how are you?” After that initial exchange, the conversation can go in any number of directions.

When we lived in northern Germany, years ago, we learned that a typical greeting did not always involve such pleasantries. After “Guten Tag” or “Guten Morgan,” the greeting was typically short. The Germans were not always into the how-are-you-courtesy-exchange, or how-you-are-feeling-today-notions. To the Germans, it was almost an affront, as if to say, “What do you mean, ‘how are you?’ Are you a counselor?” We tried!

But there are other forms of exchange. In this country, it usually comes when we say, “Thank you.” Typically, when we as Americans say, “Thank you,” the response we get is, “You’re welcome.” It is a way we build rapport.

And yet, as I have learned in traveling to England, the response to saying thank you is not always congenial there either. When someone says thank you in England, for instance, the response can range widely: from “Don’t mention it” – which can make you wonder if you ever want to say thank you again; to “The pleasure is all mine” – which can also make you feel a bit put off; or to the last response “Not at all” – which really gets you to wonder if saying thank you is just plain wrong, so why even bother?

Well, differences with Germany and England aside, I would like to suggest that the words “thank you” are still two of the most significant words we can say. Of

course, marketers and psychologists already know this. Go into a bookstore and look at the business section and you will find that a timely thank you letter is the perfect way to get ahead and influence people, to leave a good impression. Or go over to the psychology section and listen to what experts say about showing gratitude and you will find that people who demonstrate gratitude are typically happier and more fulfilled, even healthier.

While I don't want to dispute these insights, I do want to ask if there is more to saying "thank you" than just trying to get ahead or feeling better about ourselves.

The Story of the Ten Lepers

In our Gospel passage today, from Luke 17:11-19, we read a story that starts out looking like healing. Ten lepers approach Jesus and say, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Jesus sends them to the priests, and as they go, they are made clean.

Now, it is not clear what all the specifics are in this story, but what we do know is that something very important but happens right off the bat: we learn that God in Christ listens to those who call out to him for mercy. And we learn that the way to respond to Jesus and find healing is through obedience – do what Jesus says, even if it might require "extra effort," in this case going to find a priest.

I think the same thing is true of another story of healing in the Bible, the story of Naaman's healing by the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 5, in the Old Testament. Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, shows up at Elisha's house hoping to be cured of leprosy. But Naaman is outraged that Elisha does not put on a big miracle show for him, but instead simply tells him to go and wash seven times in the River Jordan. It requires that Naaman respond by walking down to the river – a little extra effort.

It is important to note, however, that Naaman's servants when he goes to the river utter some of the most important words about discipleship in the Bible, when they say, "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash and be clean?'" (2 Kings 5:13).

In other words, discipleship, or following Jesus, often comes down to what might require a little extra effort on our part. Indeed, it typically involves a question like:

What are you willing to do to follow Jesus?

Show here.

Must everything be for show, or even about you, to follow? Most of the time the small acts of faithfulness are more significant than the grand gestures of the miraculous. That is, healing does not have to be about the extravagant. Sometimes healing is just about simple obedience.

But there is also another lesson in the stories of Naaman and the ten lepers: sometimes healing takes time.

Healing can take time.

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In the case of the lepers, remember that Jesus is on the border between Galilee and Samaria; that is in the northern part of Israel; he then he tells the lepers to go and see the priests, who are in Jerusalem. Look at a map and you will see that that is a long journey. And yet, the passage says that they were healed *on the way*, not immediately.

Go back to original screen.

That's the first part of the story; in the second part, we learn that only one of the lepers, a Samaritan, comes back to say thank you to Jesus. And when he does, Jesus tells him, "Your faith has made you well" – or, as in other translations, "Your faith has saved you" (Luke 17:19).

This part of the story tells us one more thing: there is a difference between healing and salvation: all ten lepers are healed; only one of them is saved. All ten lepers get to live their lives free from social stigma, discrimination, and exclusion. But only one of them gets to enter the company of Jesus.

There is another way to put this: for nine of the lepers, Jesus is a means to an end; for only one of the lepers, Jesus is an end in himself. And what makes the difference between the one leper and the other nine lepers lies in those two simple words: thank you.

By saying thank you, the one leper was saying something very important. He was saying, "This is not fundamentally about me; this is about God. I have been healed not because I dieted, or because I prayed more: I have been healed because *God chose to reveal his power, his glory, in me.*"

Do you remember the story about the man born blind in the Gospel of John? Jesus says, “This man was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” – in other words, so that God’s glory could be revealed for all to see (John 9:3).

It is a notion that I think raises some deep questions: for example, when we go about reflecting on our lives – past, present, and future – do we judge them by how much we have achieved, or how by many people like us, or by how much stuff we have? Or do we judge our lives on whether they reveal God’s glory, God’s loving presence?

The curious thing about God’s glory, especially in the Bible, is that it is *not* mostly revealed in the lives of those who are accomplished or successful, but in the lives of those who are broken and hurting.

That is, in terms of the Bible, when people say thank you to God, it is not because they have been given lots of success or more stuff. It is because they have been given lives in which God’s glory is revealed.

Thanking God

The Samaritan leper had such a life. I believe we can too.

For if we have been given lives in which God’s glory, or God’s presence, can be revealed, that means we also have been given parts to play in Jesus’ mission.

Think of it this way: just imagine the Samaritan leper waking up one morning and being told: “Good news! Jesus is coming by here later today, and if you play your cards right, you could end up appearing in the Gospel of Luke. You will have Christians talk about you two-thousand years from now and living with God forever.”

Now that’s quite a wake-up call! But just ask yourself: how is it any different from the wake-up call you and I get every single day? You and I have been invited to be part of Jesus’ company too. You and I have lives in which God’s glory can be revealed too, at any moment. And the way we play our cards right and get to be part of Jesus’ company is quite simple: we praise God, and we say thank you.

When we praise God and say thank you, we recognize something important: *our lives may not have been this way at all*. They may have been very different:

after all, God might not have created the world. God might not have created human beings. God might not have come in Jesus and saved us. God might not have sent the Holy Spirit to guide the church. It might all have been a very different story. There might not have been a place for you or me. There might not have been a place for any of us.

But the way we recognize that things might have been very different lies in saying those two little words: thank you.

I have a feeling that we all tend to forget this; we do this by forgetting the big picture and focusing on minor details. I might be wrong, but I have a feeling that we take a great deal of the world and our existence, even Jesus, for granted, concentrating too much on what is wrong, or what we don't like. We also fall into the trap of comparing our lives to others.

We discover, for example, that our family is not as happy as other families, and we look for someone to blame; or we find ourselves isolated from the way other people are woven into God's story, and so we take to imagining that we have a level of pain or hurt that is so much greater than anyone else's, and until that pain is heard or understood, we refuse to trust or engage or enjoy the bigger story at all.

To a life that is mired in resentment or anger, gratitude is a stranger. The words thank you are not part of the vocabulary. It is why the only medicine for such poison, or to a life turned in on itself, is the medicine of thanksgiving.

To be sure, and this is just my observation – it does seem we have a great deal of resentment and bitterness in our society now. We have drunk deeply from the wells of anger and resentment, even revenge, and we have gotten sick. I wonder how gratitude may be the medicine we need to take to become whole.

Indeed, when the leper in our passage comes back and says thank you, he enters a whole new way of life; he becomes a member of a new body of people. He leaves behind the old and participates in the new.

Luke's Gospel, remember, is all about God bringing the least, the last, and the lost out of exile and into a whole new company of friends and family: folks once excluded are now part of Jesus' crucified and risen body, all because of their faith making them well.

Youth faith has made you well.

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In fact, four times in Luke's Gospel Jesus says those words: "Your faith has made you well." The first is to the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, whom everyone knew was a "sinner" (7:50). The second is to the woman with the twelve years of hemorrhages (8:48). The third is to the Samaritan leper (17:19), and the fourth is to the blind beggar (18:42).

Go back to original screen.

In other words, Jesus has a way of making a new community out of the sinner, the sick, the second-class citizen, and the socially marginalized. They all turn out to be people in whom God's glory is revealed!

It is interesting company, of course; and our society tends to expend a lot of energy to stay away from such people. And yet, what we realize when we come to church is that we are part of that company right here!

That is, it turns out that first among such company are the sinner and the sick, the second-class and the disabled, the excluded. It is a wonderful gathering, to be sure, so long as we never make the mistake of thinking it is limited to us. Indeed, the way we enter this company, or this community, is by saying "thank you," by showing gratitude for what God has done in Christ.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that when you say "thank you," you become an evangelist of sorts: to the person who serves you food, or to the person who holds the door open for you, or to the person who notices you are limping, or who handles your groceries at the checkout line. In a small way, when you share those words you recognize that you are part of something bigger. You actually have a power that goes beyond the negativity of this world.

Now Thank We All Our God

In a moment we are going to sing a famous hymn, written by a pastor in Germany around 1636.

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His name was Martin Rinkart, and he wrote this hymn during a time of famine, war, and plague. In fact, Rinkart was conducting up to 50 funerals a day, close to 4000 in a year at the height of the chaos. He lost friends and family, even his wife, and if there was ever a person who could have been resentful and angry, it was Rinkart.

Instead, he wrote a hymn called “Now Thank We All Our God.” It is difficult to imagine how he could pen it, but he did. Amidst death and devastation, he still saw the ultimate grace of God, which had given him life and hope, which had given him Jesus.

Rinkart was a person who demonstrated the power of God’s glory – just like Naaman did, like the Samaritan leper did. He was a person in whom God’s loving presence was revealed, even in suffering. He was able to say thank you to the God who created us all and to the One who suffers our suffering, to the God who alone can raise us to new life.

I invite you to listen to the words as you sing them and to hear what difference “thank you” can make.

That’s my altar-call invitation to you – learning to say thank you, in big and small ways, and become people in whom and through whom God’s glory is revealed! Amen.