

Sermon: Leper #10
18 Pentecost, Year C
Luke 17:11-19

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“Then one of them...prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.”

In today’s story from the Gospel of Luke, ten lepers encounter Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. At that time the term leprosy included all sorts of skin diseases. Levitical law indicated that someone with leprosy had to withdraw from the community as their disease was probably contagious. That withdrawal meant they were pushed to the edges of society, cut off from friends and family and ostracized from their communities. Having leprosy must have been a painful situation, both physically, as well as socially and emotionally. In today’s passage we have lepers who, in their misery and alienation, have banded together.

Together, keeping their distance, as was the rule, they call out to Jesus, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” And Jesus calls out to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they go, they are made clean. As far as we know the lepers do what Jesus says, they are heading to the priests to verify that they indeed are cured of their leprosy and can be readmitted to their communities. I imagine they are rejoicing as each of them realizes along the way, that they have been physically healed, cured of their disease. But one of them, when he sees that he is healed, turns back praising God with a loud voice, lies down at the feet of the healer and thanks him. This now former leper is also a Samaritan, a foreigner who is marginalized and despised by most Jews, and this encounter shows the reader the importance of gratitude.

The Samaritan seems to know something that the other lepers do not. There is something different stirring within him. While all ten lepers seem to know that Jesus can offer them a physical cure - they indeed call out to him to have mercy on them and he does - this Samaritan leper desires something beyond a healing of the body only. This man is looking for wholeness of his entire being. At the end of the passage, Jesus says “your faith has made you well”; the Greek word translated “well” is *sozo*, a word that can mean to heal *and* to save. *Sozo* indicates a total sense of salvation, of well being, in mind, body and soul; it means to be lifted from trouble, pulled from danger, to be rescued.

In turning back toward Jesus, this man recognized a need for salvation, for wholeness that could only be made possible in his thanking Jesus. Interesting to think that being thankful could actually be good for us, being thankful could actually have something to do with our own wholeness.

German theologian (13th/14th c.) Meister Eckhart writes, “If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.” To practice gratitude is to practice faith. This is clearly what Jesus is saying when he says, “Your faith has made you well.” When the man says thank you, he is practicing his faith in the deepest sense. In the thank you he shows that he knows he is not self made but is indeed a created being, one dependent on his creator for wholeness and salvation. The man’s faith is shown in his response to what God has done for him. For Luke the idea of turning around holds tremendous theological meaning. Turning around for Luke and indeed throughout the New Testament is a description of someone being

changed by Jesus. Turning around means that someone has come to an understanding of who she or he is in God's eyes and that she or he needs God in order to be well, to be whole, to be complete. Turning around suggests a reorienting oneself toward the one who gives life, who sustains life, who transforms life.

For the Samaritan it was in turning back and saying thank you that he was saved, made whole, made complete, and his life was redirected toward God. In his thanksgiving, he proclaims amazing faith in the goodness of God

In so many ways, the message is so simple; we can teach the youngest child how to say, "Thank you." And yet the implication is profound in the life of faith. To say thank you to God shows us that we recognize our need for God, our desire for completeness, our understanding that we are not self made. And thanking God in all circumstances indicates that we trust in the goodness of God. And perhaps the more dire our circumstance, our ability to say thank you shows an even deeper faith. I have seen people on their death bed say thank for a sip of water. An attitude of gratefulness is available to all of us in every circumstance of life, whether we are on top of the world or whether we are fighting for our last breath.

Being thankful in all situations points to the idea that God is *in* all situations. You may know that the term for our weekly worship service, "Eucharist" actually means thanksgiving in Greek. The word in our passage from Luke where the Samaritan thanks Jesus is translated from that very word, eucharist. We will say later in the Eucharistic prayer that "it is right, and a good and joyful thing, *always* and *everywhere* to give thanks to you Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." This prayer is not just for Sunday mornings; it points to a way of life, abundant life with God. You want to find God? Say, "Thank you."

Can you picture Jesus saying to you, "Your faith has made you well?" What is it that you can give thanks for today? I have put the flip chart at the base of the chancel steps and invite you, as you come up the steps for communion to write down at least one thing for which you are grateful to God. And today find someone to whom you will express thanks. Maybe it's to our pig cooks Colin and Matthew, or to Allan Hadfield for worrying about and tending to our leaky roof! Maybe it's our senior warden Bev, who leads us so faithfully. Maybe it's one of Emmanuel's children who brighten your day. Later this week, I am asking you to write down 100 thanksgivings, whether it takes you five minutes or all week long. And practice gratitude.

Writer Anne Lamott says her two favorite prayers are, in the morning, "Help me. Help me. Help me." And in the evening, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

If all you remember to say to God today is "Thank you", as with leper #10, it will be enough.

Amen.