

Walking in Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

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Real Audio (3 MB)

In Jesus' day, one of the functions of the village priest was to keep watch for an outbreak of leprosy. This was the most dreaded disease of that time. Typically, it would begin by eating away a person's toes, fingertips, or scalp, but it would continue in a destructive path until it attacked the vital organs. And it was so highly contagious that it could wipe out the whole village. So if a priest saw someone suddenly wearing gloves all the time, he would insist on examining the person. And if he found leprosy, the priest would expel the leper from their village. This meant that priests were constantly pawing through people's scalps, fingers, and toes. (I'm so delighted that we have now found other things for the clergy to do.)

One day as Jesus was about to enter a village, he was approached by ten lepers. We don't know their names, genders, social status, their backgrounds, or families. All the distinctive things about them have been eaten away by the leprosy. We do know that at least one of them was a Samaritan. Normally, Samaritans and Jews have nothing to do with each other--unless they all have leprosy. Then nobody cares much about religion or nationality. Now they are all just outsiders, who live by the gates of the village.

It is my honor to serve as the pastor to a church that is comprised of those who have offices in the halls of power and leadership, as well as those who clean the offices, deliver the mail, or serve as the security guards down the hall. We have people here who are part of vital, extended families, and we have people here who are pretty much all alone. Some of us are very involved in the center rings of church leadership, while others just occasionally occupy a piece of a pew on Sundays. But as the pastor, I discovered long ago that all of us, at times, feel like an outsider. We may be surrounded by a lot of people and have a place in the heart of the village. But we all keep the gloves on, you know?

There has been something eating at you for quite a while, and making you feel like you don't really belong. Maybe it is a private hurt or failure that you don't want people to see. Or maybe it is a sin to which you are just addicted. Or a fear about your future, health, or your relationships. It feels like this thing is taking up more and more of your life every day.

When you look around, it sure seems like everyone else is doing okay, but the private leprosy of the soul has left you feeling lonely, like an outsider. So this isn't just an ancient story we are reading in the Bible. It the high drama of our longing to find restoration, and our place back in the community.

When the lepers saw Jesus, they called out to him saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." It is striking that they don't ask for alms, or to be given back their homes in the village. They don't even ask for healing. Just mercy. Mercy is what you ask for when you are out of ideas for improving your life, and when you are at the bottom of your barrel of plans for getting life fixed up. "Jesus, please, have mercy on me." Those are the only words that will make you an insider at church, because it is what has brought all of us here. Until you confess a need for mercy, you'll never understand what the church is really about.

Luke makes a point of telling us that Jesus saw the lepers as they cried out to him. Everyone else had, no doubt, learned to divert their eyes at such unpleasantness. That's not because they couldn't stand to look at the lepers, but because they didn't want to remember that it could happen to them. More importantly, it reminded them that in some ways, the disease of the soul had already begun. So they looked away.

Not Jesus! As the presence of God among us, Jesus Christ had come as a physician in search of the sick. Maybe the spirits within the lepers recognized their hope was found in this one in whom the Spirit of God dwelt so fully. So they cried out to him for mercy. That is what prayer is for us as well.

Thomas Merton has written that when we pray, we are not trying to find the bridge to God. We are instead

seeing that God is already near. We are seeing that the Savior sees us.

Seeing the lepers, Jesus told them to go show themselves to the priests. Now, the only reason a leper would do that was for the priests to declare them healed. But Jesus hasn't healed them yet.

Instead he tells them to start on their way toward the declaration that they are restored. It is as if Jesus is telling the sick folks to act like people who are healed. Don't keep acting like a victim! Don't allow this problem to define you or to keep you alienated from life. Don't settle for this. Start walking like a person who has experienced healing.

"And as they went," we are told, "they were made clean." Sometimes Jesus' healing of our broken hearts and broken bodies happens along the way. That is to make room for you and give you a role in your healing. And that role is to get moving again. Go back to work, return to your home, return to life, and the healing will eventually come.

When one of the lepers, a Samaritan, saw that they were healed, he "turned back, praising God with a loud voice," and threw himself at Jesus' feet, giving thanks. That is what we are doing today by coming to the Lord's Supper. One of the names the church has given to this sacrament is Eucharist, which means thanksgiving. To come to the Lord's Table is to stop the journey of life long enough to "turn back" to our healer and give thanks and praise.

This is not supposed to be a somber ritual where we mourn Jesus' death. It is supposed to be a tender eucharistic, thankful, moment where we stop rushing to the next thing to remember that the point isn't to outrun our sin-sick soul. The point isn't even to get the soul healed. The point of life is to praise and enjoy the God with whom we commune. The best measure of whether or not you get the point of life is your gratitude.

According to our text, this concept of using life to enjoy God is hard for nine out of ten of us. The other nine thought that if they just got rid of this terrible disease, they would be fine. But if the leprosy didn't get them later, something else eventually did. They are not still with us, so clearly something took away their lives. Everyone Jesus healed eventually died of something. So clearly, he had something else in mind when he restored their bodies. The healing, the better job, or the marriage that finally comes is never more than a call to worship the God to whom we belong.

Why is thanksgiving so difficult for 90 percent of us? Because the act of gratitude implies dependency and belonging. And we want to think that we can do a good job with life all on our own. Oh, we realize we may need a little help from God now and then, but we don't really want to belong to him. And yet, remember, isn't that what bothers us so much about life -- that we don't belong? Well, you will never feel like you belong to family, community, or friends until you are first convinced that you belong to God who adores you.

The Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast has written, "Belonging is the basic fact of life. All other facts rest on belonging. And it is the basic gift. Every other gift celebrates, in its own way, belonging." You belong to God. Until you see that, you will never know your place in this world.

When Jesus saw this Samaritan, a man who was once considered an outsider to Jews, now at his feet, the ultimate posture of belonging, he told him, "Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well." What is the faith that makes us well? Not a collection of theological knowledge. But a choice to turn back to the Savior and throw ourselves at his feet in gratitude. Because once you have found yourself at the feet of the now risen Christ, you will recognize the traces of his salvation as it keeps breaking out in the world. Now you can go on your way, walking through a world filled with possibility and wonder, because the Savior is loose!

The simple fact that you are not yet dead, does not mean that you are really alive. The only people who are walking through life fully alive are those who know how to be filled with awe. G.K. Chesterton has claimed that wonders will never be lacking in this world. What is lacking is wonderment.

We live with far too many explanations, functions, categories, and not nearly enough wonderment and awe. Do you really think a rainbow is nothing more than the sun rays reflecting on particles of water in the air? If that is all you think a rainbow is about, you don't deserve to be alive! A rainbow is supposed to make you oooh and ahhhh. Last week when I was stopped at a traffic light driving home, I looked up and saw a spectacular sunset. I looked around at the other cars to see who else was enjoying this, but the other drivers were just mindlessly talking away on cell phones. I wanted to get everyone out of the cars so we could all sing the Doxology together. Now, I've seen sunsets before, but I am always startled anew by their beauty. They are the fresh traces of a God who has decided to end the day with a flair.

Plato claimed that surprise is the beginning of all philosophy. All wisdom has at its origin the discovery that God is mysterious. Who is most impressed with the stars in the skies? Astronomers. I sat next to an astronomer on an airplane once, and I thought it was going to be a long ride. He asked me what I knew about stars. I told him, "Well they come out at night..." His eyes twinkled as he began to tell me about supernovas, black holes, quarks, and mystery. Anyone who knows their subject matter well, whatever that subject may be, also knows that at the core there is mystery holding it all together.

This is also why the church has historically been the patron of the arts, because art is neither necessary, functional nor even explainable. It is the unnecessary beauty that draws us to God precisely because it didn't have to happen. Beauty breaks through the world filled with categories, and it fills you with awe and thanksgiving.

One of the reasons I believe in God is ostriches. They aren't necessary. They're more than a little comical looking, and they reveal divine laughter. I'm thinking that when God created ostriches, he was just having a good day and wanted to really enjoy a laugh with creation. Laughter isn't necessary, unless you want to be fully alive.

It wasn't necessary for Jesus to heal these lepers. But he did. And the one guy who saw the healing not as a function but as a surprising opportunity to praise God was the only person who could continue on his way fully alive.

This table proclaims that it wasn't necessary for God to allow his son to die for our sins. But he did. That's because you belong to him. When you believe that, you also believe you belong in your life.

Lord God, like these ten lepers we all approach your table as a people who suffer from great diseases of the soul. But most of all, we need you to fill these souls with gratitude, that we might return to our walk through life as a people who believe you are not done creating our lives.