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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 17: 11-19

### **“Saying Thank You”**

Martin Luther, the great Reformation leader, was once asked to describe the true nature of worship and he answered that it was the tenth leper turning back.

Now why do you think he said that? Of all the stories in the Bible, including some great ones from Luke’s Gospel like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, why is this one lifted up to a place of prominence?

Here’s what I think:

God gives us so much each and every day that it is almost too easy for us to start taking what God does for us for granted. If there’s one thing I think we need to be more mindful of, it is to do our best to be more grateful to God. The Jesuit based website [ignatianspirituality.com](http://ignatianspirituality.com) says it well when they write, “Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God.”

In the passage before us from Luke, Jesus is again in a border region, again crossing boundaries and wandering where he probably shouldn’t go, and again healing people he has no business healing. This time he runs into a group of 10 lepers. They approach him pleading for him to heal them, but they also keep their distance because experience has taught them that people always say “No.”

But Jesus, being Jesus, doesn’t say no. He heals them, and then tells them to go and show themselves to the local priest because that was the law. Only a priest could certify them as healed.

And that’s exactly what 9 of them did; they went to the priests, just as Jesus instructed them to do. They were obedient. So before we get too critical with them for forgetting to say “thank you,” I think it’s important to point out that they were doing exactly as they’d been told.

But the 10<sup>th</sup> one turned around and knelt down at Jesus’ feet and said, “Thank you.”

And then Luke tells us, almost as an aside, that the one who thanked Jesus was a Samaritan. As I’ve said before, Samaritans and Jews hated one another. Samaritans were despised and were thought of as inferior. It would have been shocking to Jesus’ entourage of Jewish followers to see him speaking with a Samaritan. Of course, it would have been even more shocking to see him speaking with a Samaritan who had leprosy.

It's difficult to over exaggerate the social alienation and isolation of lepers; the best contemporary example we have would be the social alienation and isolation people with AIDS would have encountered in the 80s and early 90s.

But, we've been hearing stories like this all year where Jesus is the champion of the outsider. Stories like the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son, Zacchaeus, and even Mary- all point to the fact that Jesus loves the outsider and champions the rights of the downtrodden and despised. Have no doubt, because Luke is absolutely clear, that when Jesus is asked to choose sides, he will always choose the one who is outside the inner circle.

It's what infuriates the religious and political establishment, and it's what eventually gets him killed.

But I love these stories about the underdog being the champion. I love stories that teach us to be the champion of the poor and oppressed, or the downtrodden or despised. They show us what it truly means to be a follower of Jesus Christ because they draw us out of ourselves, and our endless preoccupation with our needs and our desires, and draw our attention to other people and their needs and their desires . . .and that, my friends, to me is the essence of what it means to follow Jesus and worship him and call him Lord and Savior. Because it's not really about you, or about me for that matter; it's about God and what God wants. And what God wants is for us to direct our attention outward, not inward on our own needs and wants. That's what Jesus' mission was all about – focusing outward.

So when the 10<sup>th</sup> leper turns around and says, "Thank you" -- unasked and unprompted, mind you – Jesus knows immediately that this man gets it, understands that it's not really about him and his own healing, because he turns back from going his own way, turns back from his own selfish needs, and thanks Jesus.

You see, part of the illness of life today is a deeply ingrained feeling of entitlement, the notion that I am somehow entitled to things, that I owe no one anything and have no responsibility for anyone. It is a deep self-centeredness that assumes everything is my right and my due, an attitude that replaces concern for the community with a preoccupation with my own needs. It enables me to maintain my distance in the illusion of absolute independence. Healed of illness, we wander off like the nine with a false sense of entitlement.

At our house these days we're doing a lot of teaching about entitlement, especially when it comes to things we want. We've had some hard lessons lately about how we don't get things just because we want them, or because we feel entitled to them. We're teaching our kids these days that:

- Money doesn't come easily.
- People work hard to earn money.
- If you want something, you need to work to earn it.

- You are not entitled to things you haven't earned. (*Pray for us, will you please?*)

Now, I hope you all know that we do not have to earn God's grace or work for God's grace. That's not what I'm saying. That's not how God works.

But we don't need to walk around with a false sense of entitlement, either! Believe it or not, we are not entitled. The blessings God showers upon us-the blessings of health, family, friends, means, talents, a job, a church . . . the list could go on and on-the blessings we have received from God do not come to us because we are entitled, they come to us because God is gracious to us. And the only true response to receiving such grace is to say thank you.

Karl Barth once said that the basic human response to God is gratitude-not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. "What else can we say to what God gives us but stammer praise?" he asked.

Desmond Tutu once said that this story of the 10 lepers points to a deeper leprosy of the spirit, which he refers to as the leprosy of ingratitude. To be unthankful, to be unappreciative, he said, is in fact to be diseased. To cleanse our spirits of depression, of self-pity, and others forms of spiritual leprosy, we have to be thankful, appreciative persons," Tutu said.

"Get up and go on your way," Jesus said to the leper. "Your faith has made you well." Jesus doesn't know what the man's religious or moral values are, but he does know that when the man saw a gift he turned around to say "thank you," thereby showing us that faith and gratitude are deeply intertwined. That, indeed, faith without gratitude is hardly faith at all and that, to practice gratitude, is to practice faith.

Practicing our faith and living a life of gratitude begins with seeing, just like it did for the leper. He saw-he noticed-that Jesus healed him. Practice your faith by seeing; open your eyes to God's blessings around you.

I've decided that to practice my faith, I am going to keep a gratitude journal in the month of November. It's something I tried to do last year but didn't complete, so this year I'm preparing a little bit ahead of time. I've downloaded an app on my phone where I can write sentence or two on what I'm thankful for that day, and I can even include picture with it. I may even get fancy and print my pictures, but for now I'm keeping it simple. I invite any of you to join me in keeping a gratitude journal. Quite honestly, I'd like it if you would. The company would keep me on track. Plus, cultivating an "attitude of gratitude" is not only good for our faith, it's good for our health, too. Being grateful has been linked to better health, sounder sleep, less anxiety and depression, higher long-term satisfaction with life and kinder behavior toward others.

CS Lewis once observed the connection between gratitude and personal well-being. "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most: while

the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised the least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.”

So I encourage you to join me, and to make note of the family and friends that surround you; of the beauty of the day; of the roof over your head; the pet that greets you at the door; the clerk in the store that helps you, and say thank you. In the morning, thank God for the gift of the day, and at night, thank God for the day you have just lived, because every day is a gift from God. It may seem a small thing – noticing and thanking – but it's the first step to setting in motion a cycle of gratitude and grace.

And then, after you are done seeing, noticing, and thanking, do something to help others. Do something big, or do something small, but do something-every day. It is the best response we can make to God for the many blessings we have received from God's hands.

Live a life of gratitude today and every day, for in doing so you are living your faith and thanking God from whom every blessing flows.

Amen.

Sources:

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