

Prelude to Gratitude

The Story of the Ten Lepers

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

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October 13, 2019

Presbyterians have never been ones for quick-fixes or easy answers to life's truly complex problems and situations. Like, "If you just have a positive attitude, then everything in life will be great." Even though it is a good thing to have a positive attitude, real life just doesn't work that way. Yet, **perhaps the closest thing to quick-fix for a stale spiritual life is this: Practice the art of being a grateful person!** This isn't anything new, of course. After all, what parent didn't teach their children to say "thank you."

In case you're wondering why this sermon is entitled "Prelude to Gratitude," it's because a real expert on this subject will be preaching behind this pulpit next Sunday morning. Later that afternoon, at 3:00 pm, she will be the speaker for this year's Harold E. Hill Lecture Series. I'm referring, of course, to **Diana Butler Bass**, her latest book entitled, **Grateful: The Transformative/Subversive Power of Giving Thanks**. This book is currently the topic of discussion in our Book Study Group, and I highly recommend it to all of you.

Diana's lecture is appropriately entitled, "What's Gratitude Got To Do With It: How Giving Thanks Helps Us Through Chaotic Times." Timely, indeed. I don't want to base this particular sermon, therefore, on her unique perspective on the benefits of being grateful – that's something you can hear for yourselves next Sunday. But I find it both timely and prophetic that the assigned lectionary gospel passage for today, from Luke 17, deals with the very issue of the blessings that come from being grateful.

There is much to glean from this story, commonly known as **The Ten Lepers**. And as always, it's sometimes the little details we tend skip right over that have a huge impact on a fuller understanding of what is being taught. Case in point, this story starts with, "On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee" (v. 11). Samaria, however, *is* the region directly south of Galilee. So, what is meant by calling this **a region between the two**? Evidently, it is meant to identify an area neither inside nor outside Jewish territory and neither inside nor outside Samaritan territory. We are to see this as **a zone of uncertainty, a kind of "no-man's-land, a place of seclusion, a land of no belonging**. To live in this region would indicate that its inhabitants are exiles from their own land.

That being the case, we are meant to **think about those times and places when and where we feel like we are living in a state of exile, a place where we feel we don't really belong because we aren't fully accepted**. In this story, we learn the reason why. We are told that this is where Jesus encounters ten persons suffering from leprosy. Notice I reference these ten not simply as lepers, which is a label and negative classification of personhood, but rather as persons who suffer from the disease of leprosy. **Acknowledging another's personhood leads us to change some of our**

language, and therefore perspective. Like saying, a person who suffers from issues of addiction, rather than, that addict. Or, a person suffering from a form of mental illness, not, that mentally ill person. Believe me, especially from a pastoral perspective, it makes a big difference.

Leprosy was highly contagious and devastating skin disease that also led to social and religious ostracism and isolation. According to custom, and the law, this story tells us a group of ten people with leprosy carefully keep their distance from Jesus, calling out the word, "unclean," for it was a disease that made them ritually impure. Even so, they cry out to him, calling him "Master" and asking for mercy. Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the Jewish priests, and they find themselves healed along the way.

This is when we learn that only one of the ten turns back, praises God with a loud voice, falls at Jesus' feet, and thanks him. Crucial to the meaning of this story, the man is identified as a Samaritan. One possible reason for his turning around is that even after being cured of his physical disease, he would not have been welcomed in the Jewish community in Galilee. The social and religious exclusion would remain. The biblical commentary, known as SALT, explains:

"Samaritans were the descendants of generations of intermarriage between Jews left behind during the Babylonian exile and Gentiles that the conquering Assyrians settled in Israel before that time. Thus Samaritans shared a common heritage with Jews, but also were quite different: they worshipped at a different temple and revered a different-but-overlapping library of scripture. Imagine Roman Catholics and Protestants in early modern Europe, with the mutual bigotries, suspicions, and appetites for vengeance. Jews and Samaritans were likewise enemies, and their similarities only sharpened their contempt." This is what makes the Good Samaritan parable so surprising, even shocking, to Jesus' Jewish audiences, since it is a Samaritan who turns out to be the hero and example of faithful living.

Let us reflect upon this person's response of gratitude. In doing so, Jesus declares, "your faith has **made you well**" (v. 19). **This phrase is a bit of shorthand for more than just being cured physically and made ritually clean. The actual Greek word, sesoken, literally means "to save, heal, preserve, rescue, deliver."** As asked in the SALT commentary, "What is it, precisely, that Jesus celebrates about [this Samaritan's] faith here? It's not trusting in Jesus – for all ten call him, "Master." It's not obeying Jesus' instruction – for all ten do what he commands, setting out toward the priests to be officially reconciled and incorporated back into the religious and social community. But if it's not trust, and it's not obedience – what is it?"

"Indeed, it's worth noting that the man rather boldly *disobeys* Jesus' instruction. Instead of going to see the priests, he pivots and returns. Despite his years of ostracization and keeping his distance, he has the audacity to approach Jesus directly, to throw himself at his feet in an act of worship and thanksgiving. And for this impertinence – Jesus exalts him as an exemplar of faith."

So why is it an important point in this story that the one who turned around was a Samaritan? "If the parable of the **Good Samaritan** dramatizes what it looks like to follow the second dimension of the greatest commandment, loving "your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27; Leviticus 19:18), then today's story, which we might call the "**Thankful Samaritan**", dramatizes what it looks like to follow the commandment's first dimension: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind" (Luke 10:27; Deut 6:5). What does loving God in this way look like, then, for you and me? It looks like thanking and

glorifying God for being the One from whom all blessings flow. It looks like having the insight – and the nerve – to **stop, pivot, return, and give thanks.** **That's something each one of us can put into practice.**

With the parable and this story, Jesus paints a pair of pictures featuring two Samaritans: one merciful, and the other thankful. The question that's important to you and me is, "Why is gratitude and giving thanks so central to the life of faith? Remember, all ten in the group believe in Jesus' power; all ten obey his command; and all ten are blessedly restored. **But the act of thanksgiving, in effect, deepens and completes the act of receiving a blessing.**" It may be possible, then, to actually miss the gift of the giver by neglecting to be grateful and giving thanks. That often becomes the case if there's a sense of entitlement and privilege, as in it's something we expect and think we deserve. Perhaps most importantly, then, **gratitude places the giver into the center of our focus, not the gift itself.** Writes the commentator, "Thanksgiving is the unmistakable sign of understanding that a gift has been given. Gratitude, not loyalty or obedience, is the natural response to grace." **We learn that gratitude itself becomes an act of faith.**

Jesus call us to a life of gratitude and thanksgiving. But this story illustrates that it's more than just that. As we have learned, the one who turned to give thanks is an outsider beyond his medical condition. He was a supposed enemy of Jesus' followers. "Like the Good Samaritan parable, this passage is an occasion for reflecting on who we consider to be our adversaries, people we put "outside the circle" of acceptability. To whom are you estranged, or suspicious? Is it those on the other side of the political aisle, or the religious aisle? With these opponents in mind, today's story leads us to ask: What can we learn from them? What do they model about the essence of life, about loving God and neighbor, about living with gratitude and mercy?" What can we learn from those of different faith traditions? From those in our least favorite pocket of Christianity?

Through God's unlimited and unbounded grace, we learn that even "outsiders" may well show us "insiders" how to live faithfully; maybe even becoming friends in the process. We are left to question the depth of what it means to belong. As with all ten who are healed from leprosy, Jesus enables their, and our, return to all that makes us fully human – family, community, society, intimacy. Free to embrace and be embraced, to worship in community, to reclaim all the social and spiritual ties stole from them, and us. This is one of the things so many of us celebrated in yesterday's National Coming Out Day.

Yet, it is only the tenth person who was made well, who was marginalized by both illness and foreignness, whose very identity – his truest place of belonging – was in recognizing that he was included in the kin-dom of God, therefore enabled to recognize the Giver and embrace all of who he is. **Through our gratitude and our giving thanks to God for grace and blessings, we, too, are enabled to recognize the Giver and embrace all of who we are.**

Let us all grow into the art of practicing gratitude. And may this serve simple as a prelude to next Sunday.
Amen.

Resources:

Thanking Is Believing: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Eighteenth Week After Pentecost. October 8, 2019.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/10/8/thanking-is-believing-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-eighteenth-week-after-pentecost>

Debie Thomas, October 9, 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 20, 2016.
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-09/october-9-28th-sunday-ordinary-time?code=OoIFp5eNPohC1f6AMivm>