

Be Grateful: Be the 1-in-10

The Story of the Ten Lepers

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

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On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your spiritual life – your connection with the Divine, with God who is beyond, beside, and within you? If it's on the lower end of the scale, here's a suggestion for a stale spiritual life: **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." I also learned this from watching Captain Kangaroo in the early 1960s. It was one of his two "magic words," the other being "please."

Concerning this important issue of expressing thanks, including its important historical context, I continue to commend to you **Diana Butler Bass'** book, **Grateful: The Transformative/Subversive Power of Giving Thanks**. It was three years ago now that she was our Harold E. Hill Lecture Series speaker and spoke on this topic. In preparation for her visit, the sermon I preached the Sunday before she preached for us was based on the same Gospel Reading for today from Luke 17.

This passage deals with the very same issue of the blessings that come from being a grateful person. There is much to glean from this story, commonly known as The Ten Lepers. We are told that Jesus entered a village somewhere north of Jerusalem between Samaria and Galilee. He is approached by ten persons suffering from the disease of leprosy. Notice I reference these ten not simply as "those ten lepers", which labels these persons with a negative classification of personhood. Rather, they are simply persons who suffer from the disease of leprosy.

Acknowledging another's personhood by changing our language, thus our labeling, leads us to a new perspective and attitude towards them. It's like saying a person who suffers from the disease of addiction, rather than referring to them as that addict. Or, instead of referring to someone as mentally ill, reframe that as a person suffering from a form of mental illness. Notice how some use the words "immigrants" and "refugees" to strip away the individual personhood of those seeking a better life in this country. That why we say, "our Afghan neighbors" not those Afghan refugees. Believe me, especially from a pastoral perspective, this distinction can and does make a big difference in acknowledging another person's humanity, thus our common humanity as children of God.

Returning to our biblical story, leprosy was a highly contagious and devastating skin disease that also led to social and religious ostracism and isolation. This reminds me of some aspects of the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, and true to this day as a way to protect others. According to custom, and the Jewish law, this story tells us a group of ten people with leprosy carefully keep their distance from Jesus and would have called out "unclean," for it was a disease that also made them ritually impure, thus banning them from worship. Even so, they cry out to Jesus calling him "Master" and

asking for mercy. Jesus simply tells them to go show themselves to the Jewish priests. In following his instructions, they find themselves healed as they went.

This is when we learn that only one of the ten turns back, praises God with a loud voice, and falls at Jesus' feet, thanking him. The point of this story, however, is not just about being grateful. Crucial to its meaning, the person who returns and gives thanks is identified as a Samaritan. One possible reason for the turning around is that even after being cured of the physical disease, this person would not have been welcomed in the Jewish community in Galilee. The social and religious exclusion would remain. The biblical commentary, known as SALT, provides a helpful explanation.

"Samaritans were the descendants of generations of intermarriage between Jews left behind during the Babylonian exile and Gentiles that the conquering Assyrians settled in [the Northern Kingdom of] 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 Parable of the Good Samaritan so surprising, even shocking, to Jesus' Jewish audiences. It is a despised outsider, a Samaritan, who turns out to be the hero, an example of faithful living, and a person to which we insiders are called to learn from. I'll return to this in a moment.

In our biblical text, the person's response of gratitude leads Jesus to declare, "your faith has made you well" (v. 19). Notice the difference when earlier all ten were "made clean." **"Your faith has made you well" is a bit of shorthand for more than just being cured physically and made ritually clean. The actual Greek word used here, sesoken, literally means "to save, heal, preserve, rescue, deliver."** It's somewhat similar to the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, of finding wholeness in life.

But 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?"**

This is why additional meaning in the story hinges on the fact that the person made well is 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 in order to develop a healthy spiritual life - **stop, pivot, return, and give thanks**. 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 us is this, **"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 we carry around with us a sense of entitlement and privilege, as in it's just something we expect and think we deserve – thus no real expression of gratitude. Perhaps most importantly, then, **gratitude places the giver into the center of our focus, not the gift itself.** Writes a biblical commentator, "Thanksgiving is the unmistakable sign of understanding that a gift has been given. Gratitude, not obeisance [deferential respect] or obedience, is the natural echo [response] to grace."

We learn that **gratitude itself becomes an act of faith.** Jesus call us to a life of gratitude and thanksgiving. However, this story illustrates that it's more than just that. As we have learned, the one who turned to give thanks is an outsider. 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.

So, let me ask the really hard question: To whom are you suspicious or fearful? Is it those on the other side of the political aisle, or the religious (or non-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?" In a like manner, what can we learn from those of different faith traditions? What about from those in our least favorite corner 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.

Yet, it is only the tenth person who was made well, who experienced wholeness in addition to healing, 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 gracious Giver and embrace all his personhood and humanity.**

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 – for it can lead to wholeness. **Be the 1-in-10.**

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>