

Transformed by Thanksgiving

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Grace Presbyterian Church
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Luke 17: 11-19

Our scripture lesson for this morning may be a little more slippery than it first appears to be. I have heard the story of the ten lepers used many times as a text for Thanksgiving sermons, reminding the listeners of the simple need to say thank you for God's many blessings in our lives.

The hero of these sermons is, of course, the single leper who returns to say thank you to Jesus, while the other nine lepers are pictured as ungrateful folk who do not remember to acknowledge their blessings or to observe the niceties of proper gratitude. All of which may be true, I suppose—but I don't know if that interpretation really captures the text in all of its richness and subtlety. I think there's a little more here than a reminder to write a proper thank you note, the gospel according to Miss Manners, as it were. One thing is clear, however—Luke wants us, as his readers, to draw a contrast, to make a distinction, between the one leper and the nine lepers. The point of the story does reside there, somehow. In order to arrive at how they are different, though, let us begin by observing how the ten lepers are all the same.

The obvious place to begin is that all of the characters in this healing story share a need. All are lepers, known to us by a label or an illness, not by a name. Jesus meets them on the outskirts of a village, because that is where lepers are required to remain—pushed to the margins, in leper colonies. They live a life of forced separation, cut off from the community by their illness for fear of possible contagion. Unable to join in public worship, unable to go freely to the marketplace, unable to work (and that likely means extreme poverty) they are reduced for the period of their affliction—which might be the remainder of their lives—to begging.

And that is precisely what we find the ten lepers doing in our scripture lesson: begging for aid. Jesus approaches, and the ten lepers call out to him, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

Now continuing down the path of similarity, all ten of the lepers have just shown a level of belief, or at least of hope, that Jesus can do something to help them. Evidently, they have heard some rumor or have some previous knowledge of his miraculous healings. They have enough knowledge of who he is, at least, that they call out to him by name, seeking aid. Their belief may be born of desperation, but belief it is, nonetheless. All ten lepers believe in—or at least are willing to suspend their disbelief in—Jesus’ ability to heal them.

Now the next part of the story is subtle and fascinating. If we pay close attention, in response to their plea, Jesus

does not immediately heal the lepers. Instead, he gives them an instruction: “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

As they went, Luke goes on to tell us, all ten lepers were healed. Now here is a significant point, it seems to me. A leper had only **one reason** to go and to present herself or himself to the priests. You went to the priests to verify that you were **cured of your leprosy**. A leper no longer showing symptoms had to be examined by the priest in order to be labeled as ritually clean, or to be able to return to the freedoms and the joys of daily life. These lepers--all ten of them—set out to see the priest as Jesus has instructed...but at this point they still share one thing in common: **they all still have leprosy**. Remember, **as the lepers went to the priest**, Luke tells us, they were cleansed. As they together **set out** for the priest, therefore, they were not yet cleansed.

Now, I’m not trying to split hairs here, but if you’ll bear with me, I think it illustrates a significant point. Obeying Jesus and setting out for the priest **as if you are cleansed**, when your skin is in fact still marred by the mottle of leprosy is an act of faith. All ten of the lepers, then, **demonstrate a clear form of faith** in acting obediently as if they will be healed despite present evidence to the contrary. I do not think, therefore, that we can speak of the one as faithful and the nine as lacking in faith. That is not where the contrast resides.

Nor, if you'll pardon a little speculation on my part, do I believe that we can properly characterize the one as being thankful and the nine as being ungrateful when the healing in fact occurs. Use your imagination for just a moment—a mother with leprosy has had to watch at a distance as her child has grown up in the arms of someone else. Now, she looks down and she's healed, and she realizes that she'll be able to touch and hold her child. She'd wondered in anguish if she ever would. She can't obey Jesus' instructions and get to the priest fast enough. Do we imagine such a mother wouldn't be filled with thanks?

A man, we might imagine, will be reunited with his wife—able to hold her again. Do you think he will soon forget this day? I think it is presumptuous to say that these people are ungrateful—I think they will forever be grateful for what Jesus has done for them. I do not think, therefore, that the story is about a feeling of appreciation or a lack thereof.

The singular distinction between the one and the nine, I believe, is that the nine are seemingly untransformed by the gratitude that they feel, however profound or sincere it might be. Their gratitude to Jesus for their healing does not translate into a commitment to Jesus, their thanks does not lead them to return or to seek to follow or to serve Jesus.

The one, by contrast, receives his healing not only as a gift or a privilege but also as an obligation or an

opportunity—he returns to thank Jesus, but more than that, to praise God and offer himself to God.

All ten lepers, then, have the rudiments of faith; all ten receive a tremendous gift of healing; all ten are presumably grateful, ecstatic even—the gift is not taken for granted but joyously received...but only one makes the turn aside to express the gratitude, to be changed by it, to offer not just his appreciation but HIMSELF to the one who has healed him. In theological terms, it is the difference between justification—being “saved” from one’s condition—and sanctification—showing evidence of God’s ongoing changes in one’s life, and choices and behaviors.

And therein lies the distinction that is useful to us as we set about trying to determine how this ancient healing story is meaningful to us in our lives today. You see, I think we can take the ten lepers in the story as representative figures.

Go down any street or enter any subdivision in America today, and you’ll find without much difficulty ten people who function on the level of belief of the lepers in our story.

The majority of people in America do believe nominally in God, something like eight out of ten according to the Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life.¹ That is to say eighty percent of people believe that God exists, and that we can perhaps call upon God for help, or turn to God

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/>

in need, or seek God in the living of our lives. Like the lepers in the story, we can and do cry out, it appears, “Lord, have mercy on us, give us your ear, grant us your blessing.”

Continuing along the flow of the story, the majority of Americans exhibit a level of faith—which is to say, our dependence upon God is not random or desperate, but there is an expectation that God can and will help—instructed to go and show ourselves to the priest, we like the lepers would go, believing.

And if we pay attention to the conversations that we have, we will observe just how many among us recognize that we have been given genuine gifts by God. Pay attention to the number of times this week, especially this Thanksgiving week, that you hear someone say, “It’s been tough lately, but still—we have to count our blessings.” Or, “Sometimes, I’m amazed by how fortunate we are.” Or even more directly, “God has been good to us.” You would really be surprised at how often phrases like these will appear in conversations at the shopping mall or the soccer field, in the workplace or in the neighborhood: not in church-like settings at all. The point is, the awareness of God’s gifts is present, and even the language of gratitude is there. I think our cultural thanksgiving, this Thanksgiving will be genuine and sincere, just as the lepers in our scripture lesson are genuinely and sincerely thankful to be healed.

Which brings us to the place of distinction: so what? Are the majority of Americans...and more bluntly, are WE—in any way transformed by our gratitude? If we say that we are grateful, is there enough evidence to convict us? It isn't just about saying thanks—it's about turning aside on the path of transformation. It isn't about feeling thankful, or about GIVING thanks, but about LIVING our thanks, being changed by our gratitude.

That is the point that is so often lost on us culturally, I think. Deep gratitude, genuine gratitude, rightly begets servanthood, it changes us, it alters our priorities. Now, I don't think God's gifts are given with strings attached—in the story ten lepers are healed and the nine are not unhealed for their lack of gratitude. The sense of obligation, then, is not a condition established by God—but it is an outgrowth of transformation in us.

Elsewhere, Luke makes the point more directly: “Of those to whom much has been given, much will be required.” Now, let's take just a remaining few moments and let's put that principle in more concrete terms, so that we can understand a bit of what it means to be transformed by our thanksgiving.

It is a core belief of the Christian faith that we need God's forgiveness in our lives: that we are often struggling, imperfect people who daily fail to live up to the call of our faith. We depend upon that forgiveness: “Jesus, master, have mercy on us!” And we believe that we receive God's forgiveness as a gift, amazing and free.

But does our gratitude for the forgiveness we receive turn us aside onto the path of reconciliation with those who need our forgiveness? Do we go to the one who has wronged us and say, “It has been hard, this distance between us. I have been angry, and for my part, I have carried feelings that I am not proud of, but I do believe that if we can put the past down, the future could be different.” That is the distinction between merely being thankful for God’s forgiveness of us and being transformed by our thanksgiving such that we grow in our capacity to extend forgiveness to others. Does our awareness of God’s forgiveness in our lives help to make us more forgiving people?

Or we might look at the area of generosity or stewardship. Again, it is a core belief of our faith that all we are and all we have comes from God. And, as I mentioned before, we are quick to speak words of gratitude: “I have to count my blessings.”

The question of transformation is, having counted them, having become aware of their magnitude, what do we DO with them? Are we transformed by the gratitude we FEEL in such a way that we begin to see a connection between our level of blessing and the world’s level of need? Is our stewardship or generosity a payment of our club dues: “How much is the church budget, and how much do I owe?” Or is it a joyous outpouring of thanks: “I owe everything!” Am I growing in my generosity?

You begin to see the point of the story—in faith terms, gratitude isn't a feeling of thankfulness, or even an expression of our thanks. It is a work of transformation, a change of heart, a turning or returning to the giver with the offering of ourselves.

And one final note, briefly made, but important to the story: the one leper who returns transformed is a Samaritan—one who is considered by the Jewish community of Jesus' day to be outside the boundaries of the established community of the faith. Mere presence in the community of faith, in other words, is not an indicator of transformation—that is indicated only by the turning of our feet, the changing of our direction, the laying down of our lives.

In short, if this text is a thanksgiving text, the challenge it holds for us is this—does the gratitude I feel meaningfully impact my living of my life? Will I, like the one leper turn around praising God with a loud voice? Will I throw myself at the feet of the one who has transformed me? Will I say through my actions, my life, my time, my talents, my stewardship of my resources—you have given me **EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING!**

All that I am, all that I own, all that I have, all that I hold, all that I see, all that I know, my life, my past, my present, my future, my heart, my home, my world—finds you at its center, giver of all, creator of all, lover of all. Ten went away rejoicing and counting their blessings. And one recognized, in the words of the old hymn: “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small!

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life my all.” The gratitude of the one, in other words—was life changing gratitude. Is mine? Amen