

Our Attitude of Gratitude

Someone mentioned to me once that this story is the only one in all of Scripture in which someone thanks Jesus. Isn't that hard to imagine? After everything Jesus does in his life and ministry, this is the only time any Gospel records someone saying thank you to him. Remember, I am referring to thanking Jesus, not God.

When I was a child and asked my mother for something, she would often remind me to say "please". Then, after she gave me what I asked for, she would remind me to say, "thank you" by saying, "Now what do you say?" I knew what to say, but sometimes I would forget. We all know what to say, but unfortunately, we all sometimes forget to say it.

Our gospel reading this morning is a story about ten lepers. Leprosy was very common in Jesus' day, and people who had this disease were thought to be unclean. They were required to stay away from other people because of the fear that they might infect them with their disease.

Priests in Jesus day had great power. Once a priest judged a person to be unclean, that person was cut off from society and family. He could not hold a job or engage in business. He was reduced to begging. To be restored to a normal life required a priest's judgment that the person was no longer unclean. That was Jesus' reason for sending these lepers to the priest, so that they might be restored to normal lives.

Jesus had another purpose. The lepers would bear testimony to the priests of Jesus' great healing power. When the priests judged the lepers to be clean, their judgements would authenticate Jesus' Godly power.

As they followed his instructions, they were cleansed. He did not heal them on the spot. He did not heal them in a distant spot. He healed them as they moved to obey his orders.

When Jesus visited the lepers, he made a big statement. He was saying to them, "You have value to me because I created you in my image." He also said to those who are not lepers, "These people are just as loved by me as you are."

Jesus told the lepers to go show themselves to the priests. He directed them back to the temple. That is a challenge that many of our modern churches face. Who has been cast out or ignored? Who are those that were considered "unclean"? They might include divorced individuals, refugees, ex-convicts and so on. The ten lepers didn't ask for healing. They were looking for pity or a handout. When they obeyed Jesus' instructions, he gave them much more than they asked for. When God tells us to do something small, all we must do is obey him! When we obey him, he may surprise us by giving us more than we would have ever dared ask of him.

What was a Samaritan (a foreigner) doing among nine Jews? Leprosy made misery their common denominator, and they joined together in a community of woe. Out of all those who had been healed, the one knowing the least about Jesus returned to thank

him. The most religious people are not always the ones who see life's graces or think to say thanks. The lepers were Jesus' fellow Israelites. They knew that he has been healing those in need and they showed him due respect. The Samaritan-who worshipped God differently enough to be a non-Jewish outsider-knew that Jesus' power was of God and that to thank Jesus was to glorify God.

The Samaritan was an outsider, and he saw Jesus for who he really is and turned back to throw himself at Jesus' feet while praising God. In doing so, he showed not that Jesus has come for everyone but that those who are on the margins of society are most likely to see God working through Jesus. The insiders often miss this, preferring to work within the confines of the established institution.

As sinners, we have been defiled with the leprosy of sin. We should put our faith in God and obey his commands with confidence that he will heal us if we follow his instructions. This will be evidence that we have made peace with God.

While the one who returned had the same experience as the others, he had a different expression because of this experience. The other nine lepers were healed, but only one was made well. Being made well is more important than being healed. Unless gratitude is part of our human nature, we can't be whole people. The other nine were merely healed. If ingratitude is more deadly than leprosy, the nine were in worse shape than before. Only one came back and was made whole.

Why didn't the other nine return? Were they ungrateful, or did they just not know to return to say "thanks" was an expectation? Were they careless, or were they carried away in a mad fury to show their newly healed skin to those who had been separated from them? Were they ungrateful, or did they simply forget?

Jesus' words reveal a note of sadness and surprise. The nine Jewish lepers who had been healed went away, clutching their blessings to themselves. Only the Samaritan returned, and Jesus rewarded him with a healing beyond the physical. The power of God cleansed him inwardly from the stain of sin.

One of the most prevalent sins today is ingratitude. God does so much for us, but we rarely offer thanks for what he has done. In fact, many Christians fail to offer thanks over their meals, much less offer thanks over all that God does for them in their lives. They are like the little boy who was given an orange by a man. The boy's mother asked, "What do you say to the nice man?" The little boy thought, handed the orange back to the man and said, "Peel it." That is life today!

Gratitude allows us to forgive everyone who has hurt us.

Nothing pleases God more than faith, and faith is always expressed and made real through action. If we need a miracle or answer from God (just like the Samaritan leper), we must do more than just believe that God can do it. We must respond to our belief with gratitude. As the old saying goes, actions do speak louder than words.

The Samaritan leper praised God, but he still had problems. He lived as an outcast with no family, no job, no home and no village. Despite these problems, he still praised God. Similarly, all of us have problems. We can focus on our belief that God is bigger than all our problems and that he is present amid our problems.

For the Samaritan leper, his encounter with Jesus was a life-changing invitation into a kingdom and a new community, into life as a new creation. When he fell at Jesus' feet, he saw the Son of God who made him well. The Samaritan's response is a model of discipleship, believing and faith. His grateful response to his healing was the start of a process of reaction. We are not called to respond as he did. We are called to imagine our own grateful response.

Like the leper, on the way, we are being cured when:

A person who loves us tells us a hard truth we need to hear about ourselves.

We experience, in a loving relationship, opportunities for growth in generosity, forgiveness, patience and humour.

Parenting teaches us to give our lives for another in frequent doses of our time, energy, hopes and tears.

We seek help for an addiction and the group members offer us wisdom, support and helping hands when we fall and support us "one day at a time."

We suffer the death of a loved one and family and friends are there to grieve with us and eventually there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Has Jesus done great things for us? Have we returned to give him thanks? God loves to shower us with blessings, but he is not immune from the pain our lack of gratitude brings him. It's easy to spend our lives worrying and obsessing over the problems of life. It's also easy to overlook a blessing in times of need or forget to be thankful when troubled times have been put to rest. We must make certain that we don't become one of the nine lepers who were so happy to be cured that they forgot who cured them.

This passage shows faithfulness in two ways. First, the Samaritan recognizes that mercy has come from Jesus, and returning to thank Jesus is a form of faithfulness to the mercy of God that has been shown. Second, the Samaritan's thankfulness for his physical healing is a sign of deeper, spiritual healing-and that is our true salvation.

Faith is not only a matter of believing. It is also a matter of seeing. All the lepers were healed, but one saw, noticed, let what happened sink in...and it made a difference. This story is an invitation to recognize that what we see makes a difference.

One of the simplest and most powerful ways we can show God's love for others is by treating them with dignity, no matter who they are or what their relationship to us. When we take time to notice them, greet them and meet their eyes-especially those who serve us-and we speak kindly and patiently with them-even when we

feel we are not being well treated-this gives them dignity and shows God's love. Amen