

ThanksLiving
Luke 17:11-19

Perhaps you saw this news story several years ago: Only one of the fourteen survivors of the Dixie Lee II has thanked Captain Paul Holland for pulling them out of the Chesapeake Bay on June 6, when high winds overturned the charter fishing boat...Holland damaged his own 42-foot boat and gladly shared his personal clothing, his life jackets and blankets during the dramatic and dangerous rescue operation. When the survivors reached land, they took the clothing, the blankets and most of the life jackets with them without a word.

“I’m kinda surprised myself,” said Holland, “that nobody even said thanks. I’d been glad if they had maybe written me a note or rang me up on the phone, but I haven’t heard from nobody except Mr. Fred Brown.”¹

Sounds like Jesus a few centuries earlier: “Ten lepers were cured that day. I sent them to the priest to certify their cleansing. Only one of the ten even thought to say ‘thank you.’ The others all seemed to take the gift, the miracle, the life transforming experience for granted. Well, I guess they will never know that their healing would have been greater, full and complete had they, like their companion, been able to say ‘thank you.’”

Not only did these lepers receive a cure for their skin disease, they also received a reception back into their community. Lepers were considered unclean and even had to cry out, “unclean,” when anyone approached them. They had to live “outside the camp,” outside the community, to protect others from contacting their disease. They were outcasts. The healing of the disease not only made them physically well, but also restored them to the community from which they had been excluded. The barriers that had caused much emotional turmoil and social isolation were torn down. It was indeed a double miracle they experienced that day.

But one leper received a triple miracle. Not only was he physically cured and emotionally restored to community; he also experienced spiritual healing. When the lepers initially approached Jesus, they were careful to keep their distance so as not to expose him to their disease. They approached Jesus, but did not fully embrace him. They were not certain that they belonged to the God this man represented. Perhaps God had rejected them just as their friends had. The physical distance they kept from Jesus represented their fear that they were not accepted by God.

But one leper, upon experiencing his physical cleansing, recognized the gift and the Source of the gift. He returned to thank the Giver.

Physically he drew near to Jesus, kneeling at Jesus' feet with his face on the ground in a posture of adoration. Any emotional distance he may have surmised from Jesus was erased by Jesus' gesture of healing. Greater than the physical and emotional healing was the spiritual healing the leper experienced. He no longer needed to keep his distance from this representative of God; he finally knew that he belonged to God and was fully embraced by God. The aching pain of estrangement from his Creator was gone and replaced by a warm assurance of acceptance. He knew he was indeed loved by God.

To this one man who turned around to say thank you, Jesus said, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." Ten are cured, but only one is made well, whole, saved – and the reason, apparently, is his expression of gratitude.

Think about that: wholeness, wellness, happiness, salvation come as a result of thanksgiving and gratitude.

Consider this: faith is defined here not as believing certain doctrines to be true or living in purity and holiness. Faith, saving faith, is described as taking delight in God's amazing goodness and love.

The opposite, a lack of faith, is accepting God's gifts and taking them for granted, not expressing gratitude or taking delight. It would almost be a sense of entitlement, a feeling that one is deserving of all one has. We become blind to the fact that life itself is a gift; we aren't entitled to anything. We are here by the sheer grace of God. There is no desire to look behind the gifts of life to the Giver of it all.

A colleague, Ron Parker, suggests that the opposite of gratitude is resentment. He asks, "Where does this resentment come from? If we dare to take a step down into the darkness below resentment, we'll most likely find anger and down another flight of stairs from anger, we most often find a basement of fear. Fear, in the Bible, is the opposite of faith. Most of the angels that we will encounter during the next four weeks of Advent preface their messages with 'Do not be afraid.' In other words, 'Have faith.'"²

Fear is almost always a fear of losing something. Out of this fear we tend to hold on to, to harbor and to hoard what we have. And the more we have, the more we have to lose, which generates more fear. We can't bear to think of living without it. We forgot that we came into the world with nothing, that all we have is gift. We've fallen into the trap of the nine lepers who took their health for granted and forgot to give thanks for their healing.

The life of faithful people, people living in relationship with God, is meant to be a life of gratitude, a life of thanksgiving. The leper who returns

to Jesus to give thanks is a model for thanksgiving. He teaches us the three “R’s”: Recognize, Return, and Respond. The tenth leper recognizes that he has been cured, he returns to the healer, and he responds with praise.

The leper saw that he had been healed. He saw something different in his life. He had the vision to see that things had changed. Something positive had happened. He wasn’t blinded by expectations or entitlement. His eyes were open to the possibilities of life. He was wearing “gratitude glasses” which helped him see the blessings of life.

Frequently I walk back and forth from the church to the parsonage. I realized the other day that I often have my head down, looking for potholes in the road and bumps in the sidewalk so I don’t trip. That’s important, but I want to be conscious to look up more so that I don’t miss out on the beautiful blue sky and the changing colors of the leaves, the flock of geese passing by and the squirrels jumping through the trees. I don’t want to be blind to the blessings of life. I want to see and recognize the gifts of God.

Walt Whitman said, “I find letters from God dropped in the street and everyone is signed by God’s name.” God sends us love letters each and every day. We simply need to open our eyes to notice them.

Upon recognizing his changed physical condition, the leper turned back. He turned around and returned to the healer. Turning around is a prominent biblical posture. We usually describe it as repentance, turning from ungodly ways and turning toward godly ways. The leper repented, turned from taking the gifts of God for granted, and turned toward praising God for the blessings of life.

That’s the third R – Respond. Recognize our blessings, Return to the Giver, and Respond with praise and thanksgiving. The theologian Karl Barth 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,” Barth said.

Think of that: the purpose of faith is to give God praise. God has made us for joy, for experiencing the joy of life, and for expressing joy by thanking, praising, and glorifying the One who created us and loved us, stood by us and blessed us on our way. For Christians, giving thanks is not to be simply an annual event; it is meant to be a daily occurrence, in fact, it is a way of living – thanksgiving.

In a book on the Psalms, C.S. Lewis made the interesting point that the act of thanking God was actually for our benefit, not God’s. The psalmist knew something important, Lewis said, namely that not to praise and thank God was to miss something essential. Furthermore, there is a connection between expressions of gratitude and personal happiness. He

wrote, "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most, while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible."³

The leper shows us the path to thanksgiving: recognize the blessings of God, return to the Source of the blessings, and respond with thanks and praise. The three R's of faith: Recognize, Return, and Respond.

I appreciate the life of one man who lived this pattern of faith, and took his response beyond praise to action. One morning in 1896, he woke to a glorious new day. The birds were singing their hearts out. The air was filled with the scents and sounds of summer; the warm sunshine poured through the lattice windows, bright geraniums and petunias overflowed from the window boxes in his little cottage. This man had become famous as a musician, the greatest performer of his day of the organ works of Bach, but equally brilliant as a philosopher, theologian and lecturer. As he lay there, drinking in the ethereal beauty of a new day, feeling life had been so good to him beyond all his desserts, suddenly there came to him an irresistible desire to give out to others. "I must not accept this happiness as a matter of course; I must give something in exchange." He could almost feel the hand of God lifting him up to see horizons of human need far beyond his own circle of interest.

He picked up a magazine and read about an urgent need for medical help in what was then French Equatorial Africa. A compelling voice seemed to be directing him to meet that need. But he was a musician, theologian, and teacher. He had no medical knowledge at all. How could he respond to this appeal? So in midlife, when most would have felt it too late to start a new profession, he entered medical school. In a few years, Dr. Albert Schweitzer was on his way to Africa to use his new medical skills in one of the most primitive places on earth. "What a waste," people said, "to bury his musical talents in darkest Africa and his brilliant mind among primitive people."

But to Schweitzer there came a great sense of fulfillment. With his own hands he helped to build a simple hospital in a jungle clearing at Lambarene. He returned to Europe to give concert tours to raise money for his enterprise and became the living embodiment of his own dictum: "The only ones among us who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve." "Our greatest mistake in life," he said, "is to walk through life with closed eyes. We do not notice our chances. If we deliberately search, we see so many who need help, not only in big but in little things."

Schweitzer's life was one of thanksgiving: recognizing the blessings of God, returning to the Source of the gifts, and responding with thanks and service.

May the three R's of faith - Recognize, Return, and Respond – guide us into thanksgiving each and every day. Amen.

¹ Thanks to Rev. Bob Olmstead.

² Rev. Ron Parker, “Stewards of Our Gratitude,” Epworth United Methodist Church, Berkeley, CA, November 24, 2002.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, pp. 78-81.

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