

sermon-10/14/07 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Thankful On the Way”
Luke 17:11-19

My guess is that many in this room have heard this story before. Those who create Sunday School materials love to include this passage out of Luke. Contrary to what you might have heard before, this text is not, as one commentator says, about the importance of writing thank you notes after you receive a gift.

I realize being thankful is critical to the story, but a whole lot more is going on here. We need to do some unpacking of this text to see its complexity. Martin Luther felt these few verses in Luke were so important and full of meaning that he devoted a whole commentary to this passage alone!

Let's start with leprosy. As you may have heard, what that culture called leprosy may have been many other skin diseases and not just what we call leprosy. They did not have a modern medical understanding of what was contagious and what was just some other skin disorder, like eczema.

But, regardless of how they understood it, when the priest diagnosed someone as having leprosy, it was a devastating diagnosis. You had to leave your family and friends, your job, your home, your whole community. This disease isolated one and basically destroyed one's life.

Few people have leprosy today. It is easy for us to sit back and see this as a healing story with no connection to our lives. But, as one commentator notes, leprosy is a great symbol for something that does relate to us. Leprosy, in this story, could be a metaphor of our brokenness because of sin.

Any who have dealt with the power of sin in their life know it is humanly impossible to cure ourselves of sin. We know sin works to separate us from others. Sin, like leprosy, can cause broken relationships and isolation. We are all sinners. Thus, we are all lepers in that sense.

This, then, is a story about us. We, who call ourselves Christians, are on the road, on the way, on a spiritual journey with Jesus, however you want to put it. One of the big tasks we need to do on this journey is to be healed of all those behaviors, attitudes, and fears that separate us from one another. We need to be healed of the damage sin has caused in our lives.

The first step on this important journey is to recognize we need help. Like the lepers, we can cry out, “Have mercy on us” Jesus. In fact, “help me” is one of the most primitive forms of prayer. It is a prayer that recognizes we are not self-sufficient. We can't pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, as one scholar affirms. We need help.

Anyone caught in depression or some addiction recognizes that healing begins with the realization we need help. Any who are suffering in a broken relationship, who are overwhelmed by parenting, who find it hard to communicate with parents, or who are dealing with anger and shame know how vulnerable we are to sin and the brokenness it can cause. The first step to healing is to cry, “Help me.”

Jesus, in our text, responds. He responds in a way that is a bit surprising. He doesn't touch the lepers. He doesn't pray for them. He doesn't even interact with them. He simply tells them to go and show themselves to the priest.

To obey Jesus, the lepers must believe they will be healed of their leprosy. That would be the only reason they would go to the priest. They would have to act as if they were going to be healed. Someone once said that is exactly the nature of faith. We act as if what God, in Christ, promises is true.

Many of us understand this acting “as if.” When we get in over our heads at work, in parenting, or some other situation that requires much of us, sometimes we just have to act as if we know what we are doing. It can be scary, but it is better than just giving up, or being so cynical we can't step out in uncertain times and do something.

Acting “as if” is basic to the faith journey. Most of the people I trust, my spiritual mentors, have doubts in their journey of faith. Instead of trying to stuff those doubts, or drown them out with ever more vociferous affirmations of faith, they simply act as if they have no doubts. They step out in faith, trusting God even when, from any outside perspective, things look hopeless. Like the lepers, they are obedient to Jesus, trusting it will lead to good things.

As we know, the lepers were healed. They were restored to community, given back their life. That, in itself, is wonderful. We may not understand miracles, but we do know people who have experienced healing for unknown reasons. But, says Luke in our passage, something more important than a physical healing can happen.

It is here where we get to the one lone leper who returned to give thanks. The text says he sees and then returns to Jesus. When he returns he experiences something more than physical healing. He is made whole. The Greek word translated “made well” in verse 19 in our Bible is something much more significant than the Greek word “made clean” in verse 14.

One commentator writes, “What a shame to have met Jesus, the Lord and Giver of life . . . and then to come away from that meeting with nothing more than our health.” As wonderful as health is, the spiritual journey is about something deeper and more significant. It is about being made whole, made well, saved from all those powers that hold us hostage. The spiritual journey is about seeing God in the midst of our life and the grace God's presence brings.

When we see signs of God's presence clearly we don't go back to life as usual. We don't just stumble along waiting for the next moment when we will need to cry, "Help me." Instead we give thanks. The prayer "Thank you" is a much more mature prayer than "Help me." In fact someone once said the levels of prayer are these: Give to me, Help me, guide me, thank you.

One commentary I read points out that grace and gratitude are related linguistically. They come from the same root. The authors write, "There can be no awareness of grace without gratitude, no gratitude without an awareness of grace."

When we open our eyes to God's grace in our lives, we end up being thankful people. Some have even described the Church as "the community of the grateful." That is a wonderful title. If only it were the way things really are in most churches. Communities of gratitude have the power to transform the world.

Writing thank you notes is fine as far as that goes. I know my grandmother would be very proud of me when I write them. Better yet is looking more deeply as we journey through life, noticing moments of grace and healing. When we see differently, we will not just go back to life as usual. We will mature in our faith. The best sign of that maturity is gratitude. Our prayers will still have a "help me" component, but "thank you" will be ever more common on our lips. Amen