

Sermon for Pentecost 21 (23C)

Trinity Parish Seattle

October 9, 2016

Luke 17:11-19 – The Ten Lepers, Gratitude

The story of the ten lepers that we have just heard could be used to talk about any number of important issues: it could be a parable about the relations of Jews and Samaritans; or the marginalization of people suffering from a dreaded disease and the punitive nature of the laws regarding untouchable peoples; it could be used to talk about Jesus' willingness to bend the purity laws in favor of compassion for the outcast; or it could be about his progress on his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and the evidence of his identity as the Christ.

But this little story is primarily about one thing – Gratitude. That's right – Gratitude.

I could easily fill a sermon with stories or famous quotes about gratitude, and how important it is, and maybe that would be a good thing to do. But the simple picture of a man doubly an outcast – a leper and a Samaritan – turning around and offering Jesus his thanks for his healing says it all. And it makes the point all the more because of the contrast with those who do not bother, those who do not think to do so, or who don't feel it is necessary, or are too busy getting on with things, or who know Jesus will understand, or who can find a thousand other excuses for not expressing their gratitude. "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"

How often have we done the same? I certainly have! Whether it is our failure to write that thank-you note to someone for a favor done, or our failure to give thanks to God just for the gift of being, we all most likely have fallen short in showing gratitude.

There was in this story, to be sure, something to be thankful for. It began with Jesus noticing the lepers. "When he *saw* them," Luke says. Jesus saw them. That

is a small but significant detail. Israel's purity laws and human nature conspired to make these lepers invisible. In those days lepers grew accustomed to the turned head, the averted gaze, the lack of recognition, in much the same way the homeless on our streets today do as we pass them by without any acknowledgment. Lepers were unclean – which was to say, they were less than fully human, invisible. It must have been a bit shocking, then, for them to look at Jesus and see his eyes looking back at them. That would have been enough by itself to fill their hearts with gratitude. "Someone looked at me! He saw me! I'm a person!"

But Jesus does more. Not a whole lot more, though. He said to them, "go and show yourselves to the priests." Nothing more. But they did it. They turned, not having yet been healed, and headed for the priests, figuring if this person had bothered first of all to *look* at them, and then to *speak* to them, perhaps they should do what he said. And as they went along the way, they noticed that they had been healed. You can only imagine what incredible joy they must have felt! Overcome! Ecstatic! They headed straight for the priests as Jesus had said to do.

All except for one. This one, whether because of the good training from his mother, or just a deeply thankful heart, turned around, went back, and thanked Jesus. He came back, "praising God with a loud voice," then "prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him."

Luke's gospel tells this story to emphasize how important gratitude is. "Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well."

Modern day scholars, of course, want to study such things, with empirical double-blind studies funded by NHS or the CDC. Scientists have begun examining the links between religion and health, both physical and mental. In one study two psychologists were trying to understand the correlation between faith and happiness. They conducted a study demonstrating that gratitude plays a significant role in a person's sense of well-being. Their study required several hundred people in three different groups to keep daily diaries. The first group kept a diary of the events that occurred during the day, while the second group

recorded their unpleasant experiences. The last group made a daily list of things for which they were grateful.

The results of their study indicated that daily gratitude exercises resulted in higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism and energy. Additionally, the gratitude group experienced less depression and stress, was more likely to help others, exercised more regularly and made more progress toward personal goals. According to the findings, people who express gratitude are also more likely to feel loved. The two researchers also noted that gratitude encouraged a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness among people since one act of gratitude encourages another.¹

Why then, with all these benefits, are we not more grateful?! Is it because we have nothing to be grateful for? I don't think so.

It's amazing to me that some of the most grateful people I've ever met are among the poorest people in the world. One of my seminary professors, Henri Nouwen, noticed this phenomenon in his little book titled *Gracias! A Latin American Journal*. In this book he tells us about his experience living among the poor of Latin America:

Gratitude is one of the most visible characteristics of the poor that I have come to know. I am always surrounded by words of thanks: "Thanks for your visit, your blessing, your sermon, your prayer, your gifts, your presence with us." Even the smallest and most necessary goods are a reason for gratitude. This all-pervading gratitude is the basis for celebration. Not only are the poor grateful for life, but they also celebrate life constantly. A visit, a reunion, a simple meeting are always like little celebrations. Every time a new gift is recognized, there are songs or toasts, words of congratulation, or something to eat and drink. And every gift is shared. "Have a drink, take some fruit, eat our bread" is the response to every visit I make, and this is what I see

¹ "Gratitude Theory," at http://www.acfnewsresource.org/religion/gratitude_theory.html.

people do for each other. All of life is a gift, a gift to be celebrated, a gift to be shared."²

Isn't it amazing how those who live on the edge and without the sense of entitlement we so often have can teach us to celebrate life as a gift. Hanna Perls is with us today from El Salvador. Her being here reminds me of my own experiences in El Salvador, like the little girl in a kindergarten I sat down by who shared her sandwich with me because she saw that I didn't have one – she took nothing for granted; or the former child soldier from Sudan who went on to study at university in Uganda, absolutely *effusive* with gratitude for the help we gave him to continue his studies.

Or the women who sleep in our shelter who have been so incredibly grateful for a place to put a mat on the floor, inside, out of the rain. I could go on.

If the poor can teach us to *be* grateful, then perhaps the Jewish tradition can help us learn the importance of *expressing* our gratitude in words addressed to God. In Judaism both the home and the synagogue are considered places for worship. Yet there are many blessings meant to be recited outside the synagogue and the home on one occasion or another. Here are a few examples of these specific expressions of gratitude to God:

On eating a seasonal fruit for the first time in its season

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

On hearing thunder

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, whose strength and power fill the universe.

On seeing an exceptionally beautiful person, tree, or field

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has filled the universe with beauty.

² Henri Nouwen, *Gracias! A Latin American Journal*.

And even this one!

On seeing a strange-looking person or animal

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who makes the creatures different.

Perhaps we find it hard to express our thanks in prayer. Perhaps we can learn from the poor that life is a cause for celebration. And perhaps we can learn from the Jewish tradition to put our gratitude into words addressed to God.

If there is one habit worth forming, it is the habit of gratitude.

Listen to this observation from Professor Thomas Troeger of Yale Divinity School. He says,

Because I preach in many different congregations throughout North America, I have the privilege of participating in a form of corporate prayer that has become common to a great many Christian traditions. . . . No matter what forms these prayers take, I have observed the following pattern to be nearly universally true: When it comes to concerns and prayers for others the church fills with the sound of the names of particular persons and places and needs. But when it comes time to offer prayers of thanksgiving, silence often descends. There are a few voices here and there, 'Thank you for the lovely day,' 'Thank you for the children's choir.' But the prayer of thanksgiving never rises to the level of the chorus of human need. Why is giving thanks so hard for the human heart? Why is it that we are quick to let God know our need and reticent with gratitude?

I think we should take a moment now to think of something for which we are grateful, and be prepared to offer up our gratitude in our prayers in just a few moments from now. Perhaps our Intercessors can give us just a little longer today to make our thanks known.

G. K. Chesterton had some things to say about gratitude: "I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder."

In another place he said: "You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink."

Only one out of ten returned to give thanks. That's probably about the percentage of time on average that we actually do give thanks when we ought to.

The 14th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, said this: "If the only prayer you ever said in your whole life was 'thank you,' that would be enough."

It's a prayer we can't possibly pray enough.