

“The Heart of Gratitude”

Luke 17:11-19

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The story of Jesus healing the ten lepers is so familiar to us that it's hard to imagine just how dramatic this event would have been in Jesus' ministry. Leprosy is not a common disease to us today and infectious diseases that require a person to be quarantined are rare as well. The SARS epidemic was the last time in recent history that I remember people being quarantined for long periods of time and seeing on TV people wearing masks to prevent their exposure to SARS.

We must work to imagine what it was like for these ten lepers. Lepers led isolated lives of despair. What must it have been like to be pulled from ones home and family and be sent to a location far out of town? It must have been somewhat like a prison sentence, yet one had committed no crime. I can't imagine being ordered to leave Tom never to be close to him again and then be forced to go live with sick people who would very visibly show me daily what I was destined to become. This was the life of a leper. They were commanded to shout out the words “unclean, unclean” whenever they ventured into the open so that unsuspecting passerby's would go another way and avoid possible contamination. Early in the AIDS epidemic people voiced similar fears about being close to those infected with the disease.

What desperate lives lepers must have lived? It was no wonder that when these ten lepers heard that the healer was coming their way, they'd be on the look out, and it was no wonder that if there was even the slightest bit of hope that Jesus could heal them and restore them to their normal lives, that these lepers would beg Jesus “have mercy on us.”

Well, you know the story. It's quite simple. The lepers plead for Jesus to heal them and Jesus says, “Go and show yourselves to the high priest.” The priest was the “clearing house for social restoration.” Perhaps the lepers were at first confused by Jesus sending them away to see the high priest even before they had been healed. For it wasn't until they were “on the way” that they discovered they had been cleansed of their leprosy, and so who could blame them for hurrying on to show the priest they were clean, so that they could run to embrace their families. After months or years of separation who can fault them for running home.

It was only one, one leper who was healed, and a foreigner at that, a Samaritan, who having noticed that he is healed and cleansed of this dreaded disease, stops in his tracks even before the priest gives him the “all clear.” And this leper went back, falling at Jesus feet, to express his gratitude, to return thanks.

The simplest point of this story in Luke is that God values a grateful heart. But I think it's harder to be grateful if you've never felt a need. It's hard for human beings to really be grateful for health when they've not known chronic illness. It's hard to teach kids gratitude today because many children have never known genuine want.

On the other hand, we live in a world where people *do* know want and where people have great unmet needs. George Forman was interviewed as part of “hidden kitchens,” an NPR series. It seems his grill has become a “hidden kitchen” for many homeless people who have the ingenuity to find electrical plugs in unsuspecting places.

George Forman spoke about growing up in Houston, Texas and being hungry much of the time. His playmates would be called in for supper and he would be told to go on home for his supper, but he knew there would be no supper waiting for him. He told about the shame he felt

not having 26 cents for a school lunch and sitting in the cafeteria with nothing to eat. He learned to find a used paper bag in the trash on his way to school, blow it up so it appeared to be stuffed with food and carry it to school with him just to avoid the shame of having no lunch.

Later in life he joined the job corps, and he said it took him about three months to finally realize that he would be getting three meals a day. He couldn't get over waking up each day and getting breakfast again! After Forman's boxing career was over, he invented the George Forman grill. He loved cooking food for others. His love must have been multiplied having lived many years on an empty stomach. George Forman had a deep well of gratitude from which he longed to share the joy of having enough food to eat.

From what I've observed gratitude is often born out of first feeling an unmet need; one that causes a degree of pain or discomfort. But very perceptive people, people in tune with the heart of God may learn gratitude by simply observing others with desperate needs. They notice the suffering of others. They have empathy like God has empathy. To meet the hunger of those without food is why many of us are walking around the sanctuary, the church yard, or like the youth going to Ontario to participate in the Walk for the Hungry.

There are other kinds of hunger besides the pain in our stomachs. There is the emptiness we sometimes feel in our souls. If we're honest about our human condition, we know that we are all needy. Needy of the *Amazing Grace* God offers. As a child I remember thinking I was supposed to just try harder and harder, and I wouldn't make mistakes or do anything wrong. I thought I had to be perfect. What a relief to finally experience, albeit years later, *Amazing Grace*. To have people say to me and to remind me to allow myself some grace.

Besides the simple lesson from this text, which is the lesson of returning thanks and showing gratitude, there's a hint of a subtext. Luke tells several stories with a "good guy/ bad guy" twist. It is the "foreigner, the Samaritan" who would be considered by Jesus' congregation to be the "bad guy." But it is this foreigner, the Samaritan, who is the only one that returns thanks. Jesus makes the point that God is no respecter of persons when it comes to healing and dispensing of grace. God's world is not a world of them versus us. It's just a world of God and all of us. It is the heart of gratitude that enables us to look outwards not inward. It is the heart of gratitude that turns us from selfishness to selflessness. It is the heart of gratitude that sees the glass half full not half empty.

Today I am grateful. I'm grateful for health that allows me to join you here in worship, health that doesn't require isolation but allows me to reach out and touch others. I'm grateful to be here where my soul can be restored; where I can ask God to make me a channel of peace. I'm very grateful to finally know the experience of grace that frees me from the immobilizing fear of having to be perfect. When our lives flow from hearts of gratitude, we live closer to the heart of God. And we find ourselves extending the grace of God outward to make our communities and our world places where the spirit of God is welcomed. I pray that in the week ahead may our hearts overflow with gratitude that simply cannot be contained but must be shared with others. May we stop ourselves long enough to say "thank you." And may the heavens receive our grateful hearts as we go on our way rejoicing.