

“Giving Thanks”

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan (Luke 17:15-16).

Thanksgiving comes with a lot of pressure. For some of us, it's the drama of a dysfunctional family gathering. For others, thawing a turkey in time or preparing the perfect pie creates anxiety of a different kind. Yet as we gather for worship today, the spiritual stress of Thanksgiving can be the most daunting of all.

In today's Gospel reading, Luke writes, “On the way to Jerusalem, He was passing along between Samaria and Galilee.” This is the third of four times in his Gospel that Luke tells us where Jesus is headed, but it's more than a simple statement of setting. In these words, Luke points to the place where Jesus' ministry would come to completion and, like a funnel pushing things to a singular point, everything that happens as Jesus travels and teaches, heals and preaches is moving faster and faster as it comes to the point and purpose of His life on this earth. You see, in this reading, Jesus is on His way to the cross. He is on His way to the place where He will confront the terrible reality of sin. And it's here, on His journey to the cross, that He comes face to face with the personification of the sin He came to address.

In verse 12, we are told that “as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers.” There was no more disgusting and dreaded disease than leprosy. And there was no cure. Without mercy or discrimination, this disease turned once healthy men and women into rotting bodies waiting for death. According to the Law, once a priest had identified someone as a leper, that person was immediately banished from the community in which he lived. He could not work. He was banned from the church, cut off from his family, and, until cleansed, he was utterly exiled from society.

And, if the social isolation of leprosy wasn't bad enough, a leper was also seen as one who was cursed by God. His condition was considered to be an obvious result of his sin and, more than any other disease in the ancient world, leprosy was seen as a mark of God's displeasure and punishment. Physical suffering, social separation, spiritual despair...this is what leprosy meant and, as Jesus made His way into the village, this is what greeted Him. Following the Jewish purity laws, the diseased men stood at a distance, and as Jesus came within earshot, they called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have Mercy on us!”

This was an amazing request, because in these words, the ten lepers didn't ask to be healed. They didn't ask for money or food; they didn't ask Jesus to pass on a desperate message to a wife or child inside the village. These pariahs knew that Jesus was more than just a teacher. They knew that this was a man of God, and so, instead of asking for physical healing, they asked Jesus for mercy. That's what this Greek word actually means. In fact, it's a spiritual term that deals more with forgiveness of sin than physical healing. And to this unique request, Jesus replied, “Go and show yourselves to the priests” (Luke 17:14).

Now, there was only one reason that a leper would show himself to the priest, and that was to be declared clean; to be reinstated into the community; to be certified as healthy; to be cleared of the disease and the sin it represented. In saying to the lepers, “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” Jesus was making a promise...a promise of healing; a promise of restoration; a promise of forgiveness;

a promise of salvation. Lepers could only show themselves to the priests once they had been healed, and yet, in the midst of their leprosy, Jesus told them to go, and they did. They went in faith; certainly not seeing, definitely not understanding, but fully trusting that the promise they heard in Jesus' words would somehow be kept. And, Luke tells us, that "as they went, they were cleansed."

It's impossible to know if all ten lepers went to see the priest. Jesus had told them to show themselves to the priests because that was the Law of Moses. If they were going to be welcomed back into the community, then they had to go through this ritual cleansing, so we assume they did...but we really don't know. What we do know is that "one of them, when he saw he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice."

Luke says, "he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks..." and then, Luke tells us in dramatic fashion, "Now he was a Samaritan." The Jewish hatred of Samaritans ran deep. They went out of their way to exclude these unclean people from every facet of life. Samaritans were publicly cursed in the Jewish synagogues. A Samaritan could not serve as a witness in a Jewish court. A Samaritan could not convert to Judaism, and in the Jewish mind, a Samaritan was beyond saving. This was an outcast among outcasts; a leper among lepers; he was unclean and unworthy in every way. And this man returned to Jesus, fell at His feet, and worshipped Him.

And here, Jesus says something critical to understanding this story. Jesus asked, "Were not ten cleansed?" Don't lose sight of this: All ten were cleansed! All ten were healed! All ten of the lepers who cried out for mercy were heard. And when Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priests, all ten lepers went in faith that somehow, somehow they would be cleansed. And they were! The fact that only one man returned to give thanks doesn't diminish the truth that all ten were healed and, as far as we know, all ten stayed healthy.

The sin of the other nine to return and thank Jesus is a glaring problem in this story, one that Jesus Himself points out, and one into which we have all fallen. Every last one of us has received God's gifts with ingratitude. And every one of us has failed to give God glory in response to His grace. But don't think for a minute that God's love for you has ever been connected to your gratitude. God's love is not a reaction to your love, and His gifts are never contingent on your response.

You see, this story is not a moralistic warning for us to be more thankful. Instead, it points us to the one and only place where God's gifts are to be found. This reading is not about the lepers, and it's not about the Samaritan. It's about Jesus and His undeserved, unearned, and unappreciated work on our behalf. On His way to Jerusalem, on His way to the cross, Jesus stopped in an insignificant village to deal with a group of forgotten and condemned people, and He gave them life. And today, that's what Jesus does for us as well!

Thanksgiving comes with a lot of pressure. Family drama and kitchen chaos will always exist, but the spiritual weight of Thanksgiving has been lifted. You see, Jesus doesn't wait for us to get it right, and He doesn't measure His mercy by our gratitude. Just as He healed ten lepers who could offer nothing in return, today, He meets us in our need and gives us everything. So today, don't leave here thinking you need to "try harder" to be thankful. Instead, you can depart this day knowing that Christ has already given you every reason to rejoice. In Him, the pressure is off, and the promise remains: You are loved, you are forgiven, and you are free. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people give thanks and say, "Amen."

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