

October 9, 2022
Lectionary 28, Year B
The 18th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 17:11-19
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Thankful

I'm firmly convinced that we're supposed to be shocked by this reading. It's supposed to be an affront to our sensibilities. And it is. After all, what do we try to drill into our kids, from the time that they are little, from the time that they first learn to talk. "Be grateful," we tell them. Say thank you. Use your manners.

So, from the very beginning this gospel reading is shocking. After all, the ten lepers who call out to Jesus, asking for his help don't even use the magic word. The word that we teach our children to say when they want something, "Say please."

The ten lepers, perhaps because human society has left them so far behind that the niceties are lost on them, perhaps because they are so desperate that they don't have time for manners, don't say that. They don't say please. They just call out to Jesus for help, call out to Jesus for mercy. They are sick, dying horrible, slow, painful deaths, they are cut off from their families, from their communities, isolated, poor, dependent, broken. So maybe we can give them a pass for just taking their chance when they saw it. Jesus was passing through their village, who knew how long he would be there or if he would even stop and listen to a carefully crafted plea. Perhaps we can give them a pass for just getting straight to the point. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

It's kind of comforting that Jesus didn't play with these poor, desperate, sick people, that he didn't ask them, "What's the magic word?" or "Where are your manners?" It's kind of comforting that Jesus didn't make his help conditional, on them getting their phrasing right. Instead, Jesus with compassion, told them to go and show themselves to the priests. Only with examination by the priests could lepers, those who had been declared to be "unclean", be declared "clean", be reintegrated back into society.

While I have concerns about their manners, I don't have concern about the ten lepers' faith. Or perhaps, I don't have concerns about the depths of their desperation. Because when Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priests, they went. Before anything had changed. They were still lepers when they started off for the priests. They had no rational reason to go. Their skin was still broken, oozing, painful, infected. If they showed themselves to the priests like that, they would just be declared to be unclean, and they might have been punished for having brought their uncleanness into the presence of the priests. But they were desperate people. They needed to take any chance that came their way. Or maybe they were faithful people, maybe they truly believed that Jesus' word would bring them healing and life. Maybe they truly believed in Jesus' mercy.

Regardless of why they went, desperation or belief, they started on the road and before they got to the priests, they were made clean. They were healed and made whole. Imagine how they must have felt in that moment, imagine the life and possibilities that opened up for them. Not only did the sickness that they have bring them constant pain, constant misery, as they died by inches, it also separated them from their loved ones and their communities. Those who had husbands, wives, children, could not even go near them.

Those who didn't could not even consider creating a family. They couldn't attend family celebrations or religious events. They couldn't work. They couldn't go near other people. They couldn't touch or be touched. And in a moment, Jesus took that all away from them, the sickness, the stench, the pain, the fear of impending death, the isolation. They were made clean.

But then the shocking thing happened.

Imagine how pleased we were when John was a baby. Before he was a year old he was saying his first word. And it wasn't mama or dada. No, John's first word was actually two words. Whenever anyone gave him anything, John said, "Ah-duh", which in his baby talk meant "thank you." Talk about a parenting success! A baby whose first words were "thank you!" Though his pronunciation was a bit off, his intent was clear. As people, as parents, as a culture, gratitude is a virtue we prize. And we had a gratitude prodigy. A baby, who was just learning to talk, knew how and when to say "Thank you."

The shocking thing in this scripture reading, to me, is the fact that, only one of the healed lepers went back to tell Jesus thank you. They were all made clean in the same miraculous moment, they were all on the way to the priests together when it happened, but nine of the lepers continued on their way to the priests, while only one went back to Jesus. He knelt at Jesus' feet to say thank you.

Luke tells us that the man who said thank you was a Samaritan, which would have been something of a shock to his original readers. It would have told them that Jesus was breaking down the dividing walls between people. Jesus healed even the Samaritans, who were as separated from the Jews, by long history of divisions, misunderstandings, and religious resentment, as lepers were from their families.

But Jesus healed this Samaritan leper and then Luke tells us his story. He is the example in the story, he is the one whose behavior we can respect and admire. After all, he said, thank you. He used his manners. We could say that he had his priorities straight. He went back to Jesus before he did anything else to kneel at his feet in worship and gratitude.

The gratitude of this Samaritan might have been shocking to the original hearers of Luke's gospel, the idea that it was a Samaritan who got this moment right might have really surprised them.

But for me, far removed as I am from the centuries of conflict between Jews and Samaritans, what shocks me in this story is not the gratitude of the Samaritan man, but the lack of gratitude of the other nine. They were all equally healed, yet only one bothered to say thank you. Nine others just kept on running to the priests to hear the good news, the good words, "They were clean." Restored to life, restored to family, restored to community.

I guess, a part of me does understand. Their whole future spread out in front of them. So many possibilities, so many roads open to them, so much lost time to make up for, so many people to see, to touch, to hold, such good news to share with their loved ones. Imagine the feasting and celebrations when these former lepers went back to their communities with the news that they had been healed, that they had been made clean, that their death sentence of sickness had been suspended. Perhaps they just couldn't wait for it to be official, to have their healings confirmed by the priests, to take any time for anything else.

Maybe they thought that they would go back once the priests had confirmed it, once they had told their families and held them again, to find

Jesus and thank him. Maybe they figured that he knew how grateful they must be. Maybe they thought that it went without saying.

But to our ears, to our sensibilities, their lack of expressed gratitude is shocking. Even if we can kind of understand what kept them from turning back, what kept them hurrying down the road to the priests.

I've been listening to this story since my Sunday School days and I remember back when I was little, thinking, "If that had happened to me, I would have told Jesus thank you." I was sure that I would have been the one who stopped, who turned back, who went and knelt at Jesus' feet. The one who said "thank you". And now, my parents taught me, just like I teach my own kids, to use manners, to show gratitude, to say thank you.

But then I think about the times when I haven't. I have to be honest. I have been given gifts in my life, actual physical things, by people I know, and I have not adequately thanked those people for those things, if I have at all. I'm not talking about a spiritual exercise, at least not right now. I'm talking about actually saying the words or sending a note or a text or making a phone call to say thank you to someone that I know who has done something for me or given something to me. I'm talking about my own practical, real-world exercise of gratitude, what many would call common courtesy. And I know, if I'm honest with myself, if I'm honest with you, that my track record isn't perfect.

And now I am going to make it a spiritual question at which point it gets even more complicated.

Have you have stopped to think about the complexity of your life and this world that we live in? Have you ever stopped to think about all of the things that have to go right for you to be able to do anything at all? We can

probably point very easily for the things in our lives that aren't going right, but we sometimes take for granted the millions of things that go right for us every day, gifts of life, of breath, of food to eat, clean water to drink, gifts of friends, of the kindness of strangers, gifts of laughter, of music, of art, that we can see and appreciate or create, gifts of skills and talents that we get to use, gifts of the beauty of nature, the fall colors, the beauty of a sunrise or a sunset, of the oceans, streams and lakes. Later today, we are going to gather to bless our pets and all animals for all of the joy that they bring us, and, of course, if you had all day, I could go on and on about all there is to be thankful for. We could be on our knees, worshiping and thanking God for the beauties and the gifts of creation and life all day every day, and the list would never be finished.

And yet...and yet...sometimes we forget to be thankful, seeing far more clearly the problems in our lives, the brokenness of the world that surely and truly exist, than we do the gifts and blessings of our lives and of our world.

Yesterday I took Julia to see a college in New Jersey, so we spent eight hours in the car together and while travelled, she played me some of the music that she likes and one of the songs that she played has stuck with me, reminding me of how much we have to be grateful for. The song is called *Saturn* and it's by a group called "Sleeping at Last." This is the first verse:

*You taught me the courage of stars before you left
How light carries on endlessly even after death
With shortness of breath you explained the infinite
How rare and beautiful it is to even exist*

What a thing to sing. What a thing to say. What a thing to remember, how rare and beautiful it is to even exist. And to that I say, “Thanks be to God.” Amen.