

“Your trust has made you whole”

Luke 17:11- 19

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2nd Sunday of Lent

Brentwood First Presbyterian

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Introduction

There is a true story about a diner, where no one was speaking to anyone else. It was a dreary day, and everyone had personal problems.

In one of the small booths along the window was a young mother with a little girl. They had just been served their food when the little girl broke the sad silence by almost shouting, "Momma, why don't we say our prayers here?" The waitress who had just served their breakfast turned around and said, "Sure, honey, we pray here. Will you say the prayer for us?" And she turned and looked at the rest of the people in the restaurant and said, "Bow your heads." Surprisingly, one by one, the heads went down. The little girl then bowed her head, folded her hands, and said, "God is great, God is good, and we thank him for our food. Amen."

That prayer changed the entire atmosphere. People began to talk with one another. The waitress said, "We should do that every morning."

When it comes to this issue of giving our thanks to God, I don't suppose there is any story in the Bible that is so timelessly appropriate, as the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers.

The story begins: "And as he entered a certain village there met him ten lepers, and they stood at a far distance..."

Scene 1 Jesus sees 10 sick men and heals them

I believe it is not God's intention for us to be sick. If it was, then why would Luke tell us about 12 individual healings and healings of 2 groups of people in his Good News? I think God is not the source of illness, but instead is our source of hope, encouragement, courage, and love during our illness. God did not make us sick. God in Jesus chooses to heal us. God in Jesus' church chooses to heal us. Jesus does not just see 10 sick men. Jesus also perceives an opportunity to be merciful to others, and seizes this opportunity. Something I believe he also wants us to do.

10 men with a skin disease ask Jesus to make them clean. What modern medicine calls Hansen's disease, a skin and peripheral nerve illness caused by bacteria, cured with a medication called Dapsone, has been called leprosy. However, this is not the same as the leprosy of Jesus' time. The leprosy of Jesus' time possibly included Hansen's disease, but was what Luke the physician called all skin diseases. Dermatologists today have a popular way to triage skin disease. They say if it is wet, dry it, if it is dry, wet it, and if

neither of those work, apply steroid cream. Because if none of these work, it might be a skin cancer or an infection, and you should culture or biopsy it. Of course, this is not fully accurate, and does disservice to all the training a dermatologist has. But in Jesus day, I imagine Old Doc Luke has a similar simplistic attitude toward skin disease. I think if it is wet, he dries it. If it is dry, he wets it. And if none of these work, he anoints it with oil. You see, oil was the cure all in Doctor Luke's day, because medical science knew nothing of diseases of internal organs. If Doctor Luke could not see it in the skin, Doctor Luke could not see it at all. There were no CT scans or MRI scans or PET scans. So in Doctor Luke's day, if application of oil did not heal the skin illness, then his culture applies social stigma. The community shuns a person with a skin disease. How sad. At the very time someone who is sick needs community the most, the community shuns the one who is ill. The one who is ill is shunned in part because the community assumes that God is punishing or instructing the one who is sick. Those with leprosy lived together, isolated from communities, at the intersections of roads, so they could beg for food.

When we were in school, if we misbehaved, our teacher would put us in time out. Now this is a very effective way to reform behavior. No one wants to be in time out. Your friends are forbidden to speak to you when you are in time out. Your friends are forbidden to touch you if you are in time out. Our culture seems to think people who are sick are in God's time out. So those indoctrinated in our culture do not speak to them or touch them, even when they are not contagious. Story about the lymphoma patient with cancer who wants intimacy. But God does not work this way. The stakes are too high. God does not put us in time out with a medical illness. Jesus' church does not put us in time out.

After speaking to the 10 men with a disfiguring skin illness, Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priest to be healed in the community and in the synagogue. On their way, their skin heals. We have mentioned before that we can be physically broken and spiritually whole, and spiritually broken but physically whole. Or broken in both spheres. God in Jesus chooses to heal us. God in Jesus chooses to heal us in all spheres of brokenness. Physical, spiritual, and social. God in Jesus' church chooses to bring all into wholeness. But what is the response of the men with leprosy?

Scene 2 The outsider sees Jesus and gives thanks

Only one of the 10 returns to give thanks. Only one of the 10 not only sees Jesus, but also perceives in Jesus the grace of God.

Does saying thanks have any power. Lets see if we can find any examples of the power of saying thanks.

There is a book which tells of a high school class reunion. A group of the old classmates were reminiscing about things and persons they were grateful for. One man mentioned that he was particularly thankful for Mrs. Wendt, for she more than anyone had introduced him to Tennyson and the beauty of poetry. Acting on a suggestion, the man

wrote a letter of appreciation to Mrs. Wendt and addressed it to the high school. The note was forwarded and eventually found the old teacher. About a month later the man received a response. It was written in a feeble longhand and read as follows: "My dear Willie, I can't tell you how much your letter meant to me. I am now in my nineties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely, and like the last leaf of fall lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught school for forty years and your is the first letter of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has for years. Willie, you have made my day."

The power of saying thanks.

Once upon a time a few years ago I asked a confirmand what the word Grace means in Christian theology. She said, Grace is what you say before a meal. At the time I thought she had it wrong. And I smiled. But now I think this is indeed part of what Jesus would say. I thought the confirmand did not get it. Now I realize that I was the one who did not get it.

Scene 3 The 10th leper's faith has made him whole

But the 10th man with leprosy gets it. The outsider Samaritan with leprosy, he gets it. Unlike his buddies, when he sees that his skin is well, he does not continue to either the Jerusalem of the Jews, or to Gerazim, the high holy mountain of the Samaritans. He realizes that God is back there on the road at the border of Samaria and Galilee. God is back there in Jesus. It is Jesus who is his high priest, not the folks in Gerazim or Jerusalem. I think he plans to go back to Gerazim to be pronounced clean by the priests. But first things first. He comes back to Jesus to give thanks. To return thanks to the source of his grace.

The most common use of the word in Spanish is in its plural form, *gracias*, is the usual way of saying thanks. In English, this meaning of "grace" is present when used to refer to a prayer of thanks said before a meal. So you see, the confirmand is right. Grace is indeed, in part, what we say in response to God's first given grace.

This little word, "grace," is a word with more than one theological meaning. Yes, it tells us why God gives us mercy and forgiveness, because God loves us unconditionally. But it also describes our response. God gives us grace, and our response is grace. God gives us love, mercy, forgiveness, and even healing. And our response is just one thing. Saying grace. Saying, "Thanks."

A famous theologian once said, "If in your life time the only prayer you offer is 'Thanks,' that would be enough." And a friend who is a real prayer warrior tells me she begins and ends all her prayers by thanking God for everything God has done for her.

The 10th leper is made whole by returning grace to God. By giving thanks for all God has done. All God has done that he could not do for himself. By realizing that he is not a self

made man, un beholden to anyone. What about you? Are you a self made person? If not, who are you beholden to?

Scripture asks us, “When Jesus comes, will he find faith on earth?” Today’s scripture answers the question, “What is a faithful response to God’s grace?” What is a response that shows trust in God? Here is one answer. We return thanks for God’s grace. We return grace for grace.

Conclusion

As the hymn says, wholeness is our deepest need. The wholeness which enriches us. Last week we said that wholeness was more than physical healing. It also includes an end to social isolation. This week we learn it is even more. It is a powerful experience of God, whose saving power is present in Jesus. God not only in a synagogue or a church, but also on the border between Galilee and Samaria.

Glory be to God. Amen.