



Pastor Robyn Hogue

SERMON

Returning Thankfully

Luke 17:11-19

October 9, 2016

Skyline Presbyterian Church

We all understand the importance of gratitude. It can radically change relationships. It can radically change our perspective in any given situation. As you heard me in our time with children, it is, in fact, one of the first things we teach our children. When we hold out something they want, whether it is another Cheerio or this semester's tuition payment, we say: "Now what do you say?" The answer we want to hear is "Thank you." And certainly we all know that we appreciate being thanked. Yet, when it comes to giving thanks to Jesus, we so often miss the mark.

And, when it comes to giving our thanks to Jesus, I don't suppose there is any story in the Bible that is so endearing to us, so timelessly appropriate, as the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers. We have all heard the story many times, but like so many Bible stories, we never tire of it.

The story begins: "And as Jesus entered a certain village there met Him ten lepers, and they stood at a far distance." Don't ever think for a moment that death is the worst thing that can happen to a person. It's not. And the scene this morning is a case in point. These ten men walked the earth. They breathed and ate. They had hopes and fears, aspirations and emotions just like you and me. Yet, there was a tragic sense in which they were already dead. They were walking dead. Leprosy was the most dreaded of all ancient diseases. It ate away at the body and left its victim maimed and disfigured. There was no known cure. In their hopes for a family life, a useful occupation, plans for the future—they were dead men.

Their situation was made worse because leprosy was believed to be highly contagious. Actually, we know today that it is not. But tell that to ancient beliefs. The scripture made it quite clear that as these lepers approached Jesus they stood at a far distance. Jewish law clearly prescribed that a leper could not get within fifty yards of a clean person. Imagine this, imagine you are a leper standing on the 50 yard line in the middle of a football field and your family, your loved ones, the people you need to do business with are standing under the goal posts. Imagine trying to yell to them. Imagine trying to hear what it is they need to say to you. That's what it was like for lepers in the ancient days.

Everywhere these poor men journeyed they were required to shout out a social warning: "Unclean!" or "Leper!" If they did not, others would do the shouting for them. And then, if they dared to come what was perceived as too close, others would hurl stones at them to keep them away. Leprosy was a serious public health concern, but it was tinged with the religious element of ritual uncleanness.

So it was that these men not only had to live with their physical handicap, but they were also isolated. They had to live in the hell of loneliness. That can do more to drain a person's energy for living than the most horrible of diseases.

Yet, even in the midst of this horrible situation, these lepers had something to be thankful for. In their common misery they had banded together. They had found each other. It is interesting to note that one of these ten lepers was a Samaritan. Now a good Jew in that day in time would have no dealings at all with a Samaritan. They looked upon Samaritans as dogs, half-breeds. Yet, in the

common misery of their leprosy these men had forgotten that they were Jew and Samaritan and realized only that they were men in need. Some of you might say, well it was a case of misery loves company. Maybe so. Yet, I know that there is power in fellowship, especially the fellowship of people who have a common need. Even lepers found it so.

Which, brings us to my first point, which is simply this: ***Even in the midst of our problems there is always something to be thankful for.*** Some of us may be thinking: Well, that's easy to say, but you don't know the problems and circumstances that I am dealing with now. And, I am sure there are many who suggest at this time in our nation's history there is very little for which to be grateful. Certainly I do not deny the reality of the problems that exist. In many cases there are very deep and troubling pains and sorrows. Yet Friends, there is no one sitting here this morning who has it worse than these ten men did. What could possibly be worse than that situation? Yet, they had something for which they could be thankful.

The song we're going to sing right after this sermon is entitled "Ye Servants of God Your Master Proclaim." It is a Charles Wesley's lyric put to a melody composed by Johann Haydn and it is one of hope and faith. It was that same sense of hope and faith that enable the apostle Paul to sit in a dingy prison cell in Rome and write: "First, I give thanks to God, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Perhaps Daniel Defoe gave us some good advice through his fictitious character Robinson Crusoe. The first thing that Crusoe did when he found himself on a deserted island was to make out a list. On one side of the list he wrote down all his problems. On the other side of the list he wrote down all of his blessings. On one side he wrote: I do not have any clothes. On the other side he wrote: But it's warm and I don't really need any. On one side he wrote: All of the provisions were lost. On the other side he wrote: But there's plenty of fresh fruit and water on the island. And on down the list he went. In this fashion he discovered that for every negative aspect about his situation, there was a positive aspect, something to be thankful for. It is easy to find ourselves on an island of despair. Perhaps it is time that we sit down and take an inventory of our blessings.

Even in the middle of suffering reasons can be found to give thanks. That is the first lesson. But we cannot stop there. Finding reasons to be grateful is well and good, but the second lesson of the story is far more important: ***Thanksgiving needs to be expressed to Jesus.***

Look at the story again with me. As Jesus entered this village this band of ten lepers sought Him out. Word had already reached them that this itinerant miracle worker had cured a single leper in a village not distant from their own. As a group they approached Him with the words: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Jesus responded: "Go show yourselves to the priests." Initially that may sound strange to us, but the fact is that the priests of that day were also public health officers. If people had been cured from an infectious disease, they had to present themselves to the priest to receive a health certificate. No doubt the lepers were puzzled by Jesus' command. To say that it was premature was an understatement. Why bother to get a certificate of health when you haven't been cured? Yet, they believed His words and they did as He commanded.

I don't know how to explain what happened next. I can't begin to explain how it happened. But the fact is that as these ten lepers were on their way to the priest something happened to them. Their numbness began to pass. The wretched sores that scarred their hands and faces began to vanish. Their flagging strength began to return. Luke simply words it this way: "And it came to pass, as they went, they were healed." As they did what Jesus told them, their healing came to them.

At this point we feel that we don't have to even finish the story for we certainly know how it will end. These cured men will go running back to Jesus with the words: "Blessed Healer! Great Physician! Praise be to Jesus!" But no, that's not how Luke tells the story at all. Nine of the ten were never heard from again. What an honest revelation of human nature! Jesus said, "Where are the other nine? Will no one return and give thanks to God?" But there was one who returned. One came back and as the scriptures say he returned to "Praise God with a loud voice." What an ending! This enduring image of the one grateful leper reminds us to choose the better way. But wait! There is one more lesson here. It is a bit of irony inserted at the very end.

The one who returned was the Samaritan. The half-breed, the outcast, the one considered unholy, showed just how holy his heart really was. He expressed his gratitude. And to this man Christ gave not only a physical blessing but also a spiritual blessing. He said to him: "Go your way. Your faith has saved you." In the Greek there is this wonderful little word 'sozo', which can be translated as healed as well as salvation. As the man threw himself at Jesus feet he did so in an act of worship. He recognized Jesus as Lord and Son of God. Not only could he return to embrace his family and village, now he had something beyond himself to take back to them. He had the salvation of God given to him by Jesus to share with them. Salvation is for all! And for that we should all throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus and give thanks.

May we remember the words of the apostle Paul: "*Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in everything; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.*" (I Thessalonians 5:16-18) I well imagine that there are some of us here this morning that are long, long overdue in expressing our thanks to Jesus. Will you return to Jesus and do so?