

The 21st Sunday after Pentecost
October 9, 2016
Luke 17:11-19

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

Saying "thank you," for most of us,
is something we do by rote.

From an early age we teach our children
to say "thank you"
and we expect that others
with whom we interact will respond with thanks,
even in casual transactions.

Showing gratitude this way,
expressing our appreciation for even small services
is an important part of our social capital.

I wonder, however,
if our constant stream of thank yous
fueled by our good manners
might not serve to numb us,
to inhibit our ability to recognize
the many occasions we have for genuine gratitude.
I wonder if our common use of "thank you,"

even if it is sincerely meant,
might diminish our feelings of deep thankfulness,
and in doing so, hold us back
from expressing that gratitude
with the overflowing joy and appreciation
we see in the behavior of the Samaritan leper.

We find Jesus still on the road to Jerusalem,
meandering though the back roads,
moving along the border
between Galilee and Samaria,
in "no man's land" so to speak.

Jesus encounters a group of lepers
truly outcasts from society.

They are inhabiting this "no man's land"
because they are shunned,
prevented from mingling with others
for fear that they might spread their disease.

Jesus, unlike most others who pass this motley crew,
doesn't ignore them.

When they call out to him,
begging him to make them whole again,
he speaks;

he tells them to go
and to show themselves to the priest,

because according to Jewish law,
it is the priest who must certify
that one who has had leprosy
is now "clean," cured of their disease.

And so the lepers go off on their way;
they are NOT YET healed,
but they sense something momentous is happening.
At some point they look at themselves
and at each other,
and see something shock and delightful:
their skin is cleared up,
they are no longer lepers!

For most of us, nothing particularly out of the ordinary
- at least in Jesus' terms -
has taken place yet.
We've encountered lepers before,
we've watched as Jesus reach out to others
who are shunned by proper society,
and we've seen him heal.
We know Jesus' power,
we have at least a tenuous hold
on what he comes offering.

But take note, please, of the things
that Jesus DID NOT DO:
Although he sent the lepers
off to show themselves to the priests,
he never directly acted to heal them,
~ at least we're not explicitly told he did.

And he never asked for thanks.

There should be no doubt
that these ten men felt thankful.

They were outcasts in society,
shunned by friends, family,
and the community at large.
They had no way to make a living
outside of begging,
and they lingered off the beaten path,
making themselves as unobtrusive as possible.
When they saw that they were in fact healed,
they must have been filled with joy.

Yet only one turned back,
only one threw himself at Jesus' feet,
overcome with gratitude,
eager to demonstrate his thankfulness to God,
not only with his words,

but also with his actions.

And that one was a Samaritan,
one who was an enemy of the Jews,
doubly outcast.

When Jesus comments on the nine lepers
who did not return
it was, I think, less a rebuke of them
because in fact *they did exactly*
as he instructed them to do
and more a recognition
that something extraordinary
had happened to the Samaritan,
more extraordinary in fact than being healed.

The Samaritan leper, like the other 9,
acted in faith when he called out to Jesus,
begging for mercy.

All ten were healed
but the Samaritan alone,
was not only healed
but also transformed.

His eyes were opened.

allowing him to so recognize
the power of God's love

embodied in Jesus' actions.
and he was moved
to visibly express his gratitude,
to give thanks loudly, openly, face to face.
The other nine were grateful,
but *only the one acted on that gratitude.*

Giving thanks is an integral part of our lives,
both our everyday lives at home and in the world,
and our lives here gathered to worship.

Listen to the words,
take note of how often they speak,
directly and indirectly,
to our giving thanks to God
for all that we are and all that we have.

The very word "eucharist,"
the heart of our liturgy,
means "thanksgiving."
But how often are we, like the Samaritan,
moved to give thanks visibly,
to do so with our behavior,
to act on our gratitude,
expressing it to God in our behavior?

How often do we consider
how we might DEMONSTRATE

our gratitude to God, and to others?

Our story doesn't end

with the Samaritan prostrate at Jesus' feet.

Jesus says to the Samaritan,

“Get up and go on your way”

and likewise Jesus sends us on our way,
back out into the world.

At the end of our worship

we, too, are sent back into the world.

We're sent with the words.

"Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!"

Go do God's work,

go be the embodiment of God's love,

go and show that love,

and gratitude to God

in all that you do.

And our response is to say,

"Thanks be to God!"

Thanks be to God!

Giving thanks to God, in fact,

is the core of the stewardship program

that we are undertaking this month.

*Stewardship is not first and foremost about giving,
it's about feeling gratitude to God
for all the abundance with which we've been blessed,
and not just feeling gratitude,
but also demonstrating that gratitude.*

It's about being so moved
that our joy is overflowing,
in ways that cannot help but shape our behavior.

Indeed, it's that kind of gratitude
and the kind of behavior
that God asks of us,
expects of us.

This expectation is woven throughout Hebrew scripture,
as God instructs God's people to give back
a portion of all that they have received,
- 10%, the biblical tithe -
to give it joyfully, not begrudgingly,
and to give it from the best of what we have,
the so-called 'first fruits' of our harvest,
not from what we might have leftover.

And this expectation is explicit in Jesus' teaching,

where he says we cannot serve God and wealth,
and reminds us that where our treasure is,
there our heart will also be.

As we move through October,
we'll be talking more about God's call to us
to give as a demonstration,
a living expression of our gratitude.

We'll also consider why
we give specifically to the church
when there are so many
other ways to use our money for good.

I hope that you will entertain these ideas
thoughtfully and intentionally.

My prayer is that we will, individually and together,
pray and discern how to express our gratitude to God
in real and visible ways
to make a difference in God's world.

Amen.