

"The Gift of Gratitude"

Luke 17:11-19

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Last week, we looked at the woman with the issue of blood who for twelve years, was considered defiled due to her affliction. This morning, we look at a group—most likely men AND women--who under Jewish law were NO LESS declared to be unclean: a band of lepers, regarded as the most despised group in the ancient world. Declared by the religious authorities to be contaminated, pronounced under Jewish Law to be impure, both the woman with her bleeding problem and these lepers shared a common legacy: all were declared outcasts and segregated from their families, their friends, their communities, and their livelihoods; all of them had an unexpected encounter with Jesus; and through him, all were healed of their afflictions with their lives transformed in a way none of them could ever have expected.

Now our story begins with Jesus who happens to be on his way to Jerusalem and passing through the northern region where Galilee and Samaria border each other. As he drew near to a local village, ten lepers called out to him appealing for some alms. However, instead of MONEY, Jesus gave them something far more VALUABLE than silver or gold. Today, most forms of leprosy (or Hansen's Disease as it is medically called) can be controlled or even cured if caught early enough but during ANCIENT times, it was the most unfortunate affliction known to man and a large portion of the population suffered from it without any hope of a cure.

Usually leprosy began with white patches on the skin causing the area to become numb. Slowly, the disease ate away at the tissues and nerve endings, eventually attacking the face and limbs. Over a period of years, fingers, toes, ears, and noses would fall off, leaving its victims horribly disfigured. Hands and feet and even arms and legs became little more than stumps of rotting flesh. In Jesus's day, the roads of Palestine--particularly the entrance to towns--were haunted by such victims—men and women, young and old--seeking charity of any kind since they could not work.

But if leprosy was a physically debilitating disease, the leper bore deep SOCIAL scars as well. The leper, like the woman with the issue of blood, became a castout and was kept far away from the rest of society. Sentenced to a lonely life, no longer could he or she live or associate with his or her family or friends. Once the disease was detected, the leper was evicted from the community, the walls of his home were scraped and replastered, and his few bits of furniture were burned. In Leviticus 13 and 14, the Mosaic Law commanded the leper to go bare-headed and wear special clothing. Sent away to live at the edge of town, they were to alert others of their condition by crying out "Unclean! Unclean!" so as to keep people away. Usually, they were forced to band together for their own survival and protection such as we have here in Luke 17.

And if leprosy devastated one PHYSICALLY and SOCIALLY, it bore a SPIRITUAL stigma as well. It was believed in that day that physical sickness and disease was caused by sin in one's life or in one's family, that a wasted body was the result of a wasted soul. They believed that

sickness was God's punishment for moral wrongs. Thus these poor lepers had to contend not only with their deteriorating physical condition and be ostracized from their family, their friends, and their hometown, but suffering, loneliness, guilt, and ultimately DEATH remained the only future for them. There was no fate WORSE in all the ancient world.

Dominique Lapierre, in his gripping novel *The City of Joy*--based upon his OWN experience in the slums of Calcutta, India--showed how not much had changed in two thousand years regarding the plight of many MODERN-DAY lepers:

A little colony had installed itself in the far reaches of the slum, in an area bounded by the railway tracks. From the outside nothing distinguished it from other quarters in the slum. The same compounds in the form of a square around a courtyard were to be found there, with the same sort of laundry drying on the roofs and the same open drains. Yet this was a ghetto of a very particular kind. No other occupants of the slum ever ventured there, for it was in this place that the City of Joy's six hundred lepers lived, squeezed ten or twelve together to each room.

India numbers about five million lepers among its population. The horror and fear inspired by disfigured faces, hands and feet reduced to stumps, and wounds at times infested with vermin, condemned the lepers of Anand Nagar to total segregation. Although they were free to go about the slum, an unspoken code forbade them to enter the houses or compounds of the healthy. By having gone to Stephan Kovalski's room, the cripple Anouar had transgressed the rule, and the infraction could have cost him his life. There had already been several lynchings, although more out of fear of the evil eye than out of fear of contagion. Though they would give alms to lepers to improve their own karma, most Indians looked upon leprosy as a malediction of the gods.

Hence, it is out of the pain and isolation of such affliction as this that these ten lepers cry out to Jesus, "Master, have mercy on us" in the hope that he just might toss a coin their way- but never in their wildest dreams did they imagine that Jesus could do anything MORE for them than that. Yet Jesus DOES do something more. Quite unexpectedly, he declares them clean and then instructs them to go to Jerusalem and head straight to the Temple priests as is required by law when someone is healed. It is only as they depart IN OBEDIENCE to his command that they suddenly find themselves healed. Restored to good health, they will ALSO be restored to their family and friends and the community that came from. No longer will they have to wear torn clothing and tattered garments; no longer would people stare at their blotched and blemished faces; no more would they have to warn people to stay clear of them with their pitiful shouts of "Unclean! Unclean!"

Of course, this required a great leap of faith on their part. Had they gone straight to Jerusalem and walked into the inner courts of the Temple while still bearing their disease, they all could have been put to death at once- for not just placing the health of others in jeopardy but for desecrating the most holy place in all of Judea by their mere presence there. What surprises me MOST about this account is that none of the ten dare to laugh or ridicule Jesus for what would have seemed like a completely absurd statement. Rather, taking him at his word and without any question or argument BEFORE THEY ARE EVEN HEALED, they proceed to make their way to the City of David and do what was prescribed by Jewish Law. This was truly great faith INDEED!

But then something even MORE extraordinary happens. One of the ten--a SAMARITAN

by birth--stopped, turned around, and threw himself down before Jesus, praising God for what he had just received. If there was one thing WORSE than a leper to a Jew, it had to be a SAMARITAN leper. Samaritans were DESPISED by the Jews. In Jesus' day, the people of Israel were divided into the Samaritans and the Jews. And though the Samaritans worshipped only one God, Jehovah, like the Jews; and though they venerated Moses and kept the Law, like the Jews; and though their holy book was the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, same as the Jews, they were considered a mixed race much despised by them. Far from regarding Samaritans as their brothers in the faith, they were called "goyim" and made objects of aversion and contempt. They were even MORE hated than the HEATHEN GENTILES were. Thus this Samaritan leper bore the cross of a DOUBLE stigma.

Yet, while they remained objects of aversion to healthy, God-observant Jews, their relation to EACH OTHER, that is, to those who bore the same disease and social situation as themselves, it was completely different. Where they might have been enemies BEFORE they'd contracted the disease, IN their disease, they were forced to become brothers to one another; they were forced to rely on each other for companionship and mutual assistance in order to survive. Thus out of their debilitating condition and status as social outcasts, out of their deep loneliness and shared guilt, all previous distinctions and antagonisms disappeared.

The most REVEALING part of the entire episode is the surprise registered by Jesus at the Samaritan's return, "Were not ten cleaned? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Subsequently, he says to the man, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." What Jesus's response tells us is that there is far more to healing than just a physical cure- that REAL healing must involve the WHOLE person, one's ENTIRE being. Though OUTWARDLY CURED, there was still something INWARD they had not been delivered from- a disease called INGRATITUDE. Where all had been healed of a leprosy that ravaged the body, only ONE--the Samaritan--had received a far greater healing INSIDE- from a leprosy that ravaged the soul. Where nine were so caught up in their cure, so absorbed in their own good fortune that they could think of no one else, only the OUTCAST of the group had enough presence of mind to return and give praise to the Healer himself. He knew that his old life was gone, that things could never again be the same for him after having met Jesus. He had been made whole both inwardly AND out and, until the day he died, he would glorify that man who had given him a second chance, the one who had provided him with the opportunity to start all over again. There WAS no old life to return to- everything had been made NEW!

The fact is that the nine were very religious as long as they needed God. So long as they still suffered from that deadly disease--physically, socially, and spiritually--God remained their last hope and was never far from their minds. But then after their affliction lifted, other cares and needs suddenly became more PARAMOUNT; God didn't seem quite so relevant or important to them. Of course, we see that all the time, don't we? The doctor informs us that he's found a malignant tumor, or we've been told that we're being laid off from our job of twenty-five years at the end of the month, or we had to declare bankruptcy to get out from under crushing debt, or our spouse tells us that he or she wants a divorce after so many years of marriage, and all of a sudden we start praying to God more fervently and more often than we ever had in years. Like those lepers, we desperately cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on me!" But then after the crisis has subsided and

things seems to be returning to normal, our tears dry up and our prayers grow silent and our appearance in church becomes more infrequent. The ULTIMATE TRAGEDY is that the nine lepers got the HEALING, but not the HEALER; they experienced a MIRACLE, but not the MIRACLE WORKER; they received the GIFT but didn't know and love the GIVER of that gift!

The SAMARITAN, on the other hand, had received a DOUBLE gift from Jesus. He was not only CURED of his deadly affliction but loved and accepted on his OWN terms--as a despised Samaritan--and so he wanted to reciprocate- but with WHAT? As a beggar, he had been reduced for years to a life of poverty, wholly dependent upon the kindness of strangers. In the end, he gave our Lord the ONLY GIFT HE COULD, that which proved to be the COSTLIEST gift of all- his gratitude, his thankfulness, his praise, his adoration, his heart, in other words- he gifted him with HIMSELF. To the Samaritan, it might not have seemed like much but it was all that he had. To JESUS, however, his devotion was more valuable than all the treasures of the Middle East- it represented EVERYTHING.

As I read this passage, I can't help see a description of the church here, MYSELF included. You could say that at one time, ALL of us were lepers, EACH of us in our own right was once a poor beggar in need of mercy and grace and healing. But then Jesus passed our way and, taking compassion on us, declared US cleansed of OUR affliction. We found OURSELVES sinners NO MORE! He made us an offer we couldn't refuse- the opportunity for a new beginning, the chance to start all over again with a fresh clean slate which is my definition of the word "grace." Freed from our past with all its crushing guilt and nagging failures, we discovered we could smile once again and face the future with a new-found hope and optimism, knowing that even if we fall AGAIN, which we will, that God will FORGIVE us again and again, such is his love for us. Yes, we've been "cured" of the OUTWARD disease- we've cleaned up our act some; we don't spend our free time getting drunk or high any more. We don't lie or steal or cheat as much as we once did. To the surprise of a lot of people, especially OURSELVES, we've become respectable and our presence in church here on Sunday mornings is proof of it.

But friends, are we WHOLE? Are we in fact NEW? We may have been "cured" of the sin problem so that our outward lives no longer appear as they once were but have we been "HEALED" also and THAT becomes the question. Have we been cleansed INWARDLY as well as out? Have we been delivered of our self-absorption, our self-centeredness- in other words, have we been freed from just plain SELF! Are we so concerned with being cured that in the process we've forgotten about the one who EFFECTUATES the cure- the HEALER HIMSELF! If so, then you and I are no different than the other nine who THOUGHT they were healed but really WEREN'T.

Such gratitude can ONLY be the RESULT, the BY-PRODUCT of first having experienced God's unconditional love. Thankfulness for having received what we could not have created or earned for ourselves--the mercy and forgiveness he offers followed by our adoption into his divine family- that is the ONLY response God ever asks from us. God has never demanded from us GREATER FAITH, he has never asked of us MORE WORKS, nor has GOD ever requested of us MORE FERVENT WORSHIP like the Pentecostals or TIRELESS EVANGELISM like the Jehovah Witnesses. The ONLY thing God ever expects or EVEN DESIRES from us is pure and

simply OUR HEARTS open and brimming with GRATITUDE for his UNDERSERVED LOVE-that's all.

However, it is important to remember that our gratitude to God for his unconditional love and enduring presence is never dependent upon whether our circumstances are FAVORABLE or not. In other words, we don't only praise God after learning we've just won the lottery or received a job promotion or suddenly recovered from some deadly disease. Rather, God is ALWAYS deserving of our thanksgiving REGARDLESS of what may befall us, whether good OR bad. God is worthy of our praise and appreciation IN ANY AND ALL SITUATIONS whether our world seems bright and cheery or everything appears dark and frightening, and that is because Christ is ALWAYS at our side, ALWAYS acting on our behalf, ALWAYS reminding us of his unshakeable promise that NOTHING will ever separate us from either HIS PRESENCE or HIS LOVE. Thus, we have EVERY REASON to be positive and hopeful in ALL situations for as St. Paul expressed to the church in Rome, "If God be for us, who then can be against us!"

A poignant example of giving God thanks in ALL situations can be found in this morning's final hymn- "Now Thank We All Our God"- a hymn SO beloved, it is said to be the second most-sung hymn by Lutherans in Germany after "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It was composed by a German pastor named Martin Rinkart who served in the walled town of Eilenburg during the horrors of the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648. Epidemic and famine broke out throughout the land and Eilenburg became an overcrowded refuge for persons. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great Pestilence, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. But after one abandoned his post for healthier areas and could not be persuaded to return, and the other two succumbed to the disease, only Pastor Rinkhart was left. He often conducted funeral services for as many as 40 to 50 persons a day-some 4,480 in all.

In May of that year, his own wife died. By the end of the year, the refugees had to be buried in trenches without services. In the face of overwhelming pressure, constant risk and horrendous conditions, Rinkart never stopped ministering to the people of his city. He gave away nearly everything he owned to the poor and needy, though he could barely clothe and feed his own children. He mortgaged his own future income to provide for his family and his community. At one point toward the end of the war, the Swedish army surrounded the city and demanded an enormous ransom from the impoverished and starving citizens. Knowing his people didn't have the money, Rinkart pleaded with the Swedes to lower the amount, only to be rejected. Rinkart returned to the city, fell on his knees and said, "Come, my children, we can find no hearing, no mercy with men, let us take refuge with God." He then began to pray so fervently that the Swedish general was moved to lower his price to less than five percent of the original sum that was demanded of them.

After nearly thirty years of ceaseless struggles, it began to look like peace was within grasp. Wanting to give his children a song to sing to God in thanks at the dinner table, Rinkart sat down and composed this hymn- a timeless prayer of gratitude that despite living in a world dominated by so much death, we are still to be grateful for all things at all times:

*Now thank we all our God With hearts and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done, In whom this world rejoices.*

*Who, from our mother's arms, Hath led us on our way,
With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in his grace, And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills In this world and the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God The Father now be given,
The Son, and him who reigns, With them in highest heaven,
The one eternal God, Whom earth and heaven adore;
For thus it was, is now, And shall be evermore.*

In closing, for the past year and a half, the world has had to contend with its OWN epidemic called the coronavirus. Striking every nation with a relentless ferocity, it has led to the deaths of millions and still counting. Within our OWN nation, it has now claimed over 600,000 lives, but vaccines have helped drive down the seven-day average to roughly 14,000 new cases and fewer than 400 deaths per day, leading most states to begin easing restrictions. Although the virus still remains very much active everywhere else--especially in Asia, Africa, and South America--due to the availability of the serum and the high rate of vaccinations taking place, sectors of our OWN society have cautiously begun to open up. Growing numbers are returning to restaurants and church while various sporting events are once again allowing spectators in; students are going to proms and families are planning vacation getaways for the summer. At the same time, we are left to confront the reality that there are persons we love who will no longer have a seat at our dinner table or be present at holiday celebrations. Parents and grandparents, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, friends and neighbors will have to go on with their OWN lives without hearing the reassuring footsteps of their loved ones any longer.

And yet as children of God, we STILL give him praise- praise for those years of happy memories; praise for the sustaining love of family and friends; praise for those doctors and nurses, policemen and first responders, gas station attendants and supermarket workers which we all depended upon to help get us through this period; praise for those scientists who created these miraculous vaccines, enabling us to jump start our lives once again; praise for discovering a greater appreciation of life itself and whatever the future may bring; and most of all, praise for a God who, though not responsible for this pandemic and the many deaths it incurred, sustains and comforts us all the same—both the living AND the dead—with the promise of his unconditional love and enduring presence both now and in the life to come. And unless our lives and Christian witness begin and end THERE, with all our doing and all our giving springing from hearts filled with thanksgiving, then our LIVES and, by extension, the CHURCH will NEVER grow and become vital once again. Rather, we will always remain just as sick and diseased as those other nine lepers who may have THOUGHT they were healed, but who in reality WEREN'T. Let us pray...

Father, teach us to practice gratitude in our daily lives that we may honor the graciousness that lies in the heart of your dealings with us. Forgive us every form of self-centeredness that blinds us from seeing how all things are grace gifts from your hand, and deliver us from a hardness of heart that is unable to express thankfulness for even the smallest of such gifts. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.