

“Gratitude is Where the Action Is”

Luke 17:11-19

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We can all think of times when we have been sick or hurt – in body or in mind – and the thing we most want is simply to get back to normal again. I remember when I had trouble with my back a few years ago; all I wanted, and most looked forward to, was to be able to stand or sit without pain. Just to get back to where we were before being afflicted – how great that would be! Surely that was the hope of the 10 lepers we read about in Luke’s gospel this morning. Their malady had cut them off from the families, their place of worship, their whole society. They were forced to live in groups with those similarly afflicted, and to keep their distance from others. It was thought that for a healthy person even to walk through a shadow cast by a leper was to risk infection. To be “normal” again would be wonderful – to be restored to how you were before, to get your life back. It’s probably safe to say that they couldn’t have imagined anything better.

This was the gift they were given – all ten of them. “Jesus, Master . . . have pity on us” they cried. And he did. “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” he said, and as they went, Luke says, “they were made clean.” You can imagine their joy and their relief – their skin clear of sores, their limbs restored to strength.

As it turns out, though, the actual healing was almost a sideline event. The account is less about healing than it is about gratitude, the gratitude of the one – the Samaritan, the foreigner, the outsider, who “turned back, praising God with a loud voice,” fell down on his face before Jesus and thanked him - and the lack of gratitude of the nine, Jesus’ own countrymen and brothers in faith. Like the Samaritan of one of Jesus’ own stories, this man put to shame the Jews who had been cured but didn’t say thank you and give God the praise. Maybe, once they’d seen the priest (the local priest who had the responsibility to declare a person to be clean) they were afraid to go back and identify themselves with Jesus, who by this time was a marked man. Or, they were just so anxious

to get back to their families and their normal lives they just didn't think to go back and look for him. Regardless, the nine were no less cured, but Jesus certainly implies they were less grateful.

One wonders how long the glow of being cured lasted for the nine: a day or two? A week? Back to work, back to routine. Normal life became normal again. After all, normal is what you are supposed to be, ordinary life ensues.

When the cured Samaritan returns to thank Jesus and praise God, Jesus tells him to get up and go on his way, that his faith has made him well. Though he was no more cured than the others, Jesus said that his faith had made him . . . well – a wellness that runs deeper than physical – and that faith is identified, actualized by gratitude. This is a pretty amazing thing, if you think about it. Jesus is teaching about the nature of faith here. To “have faith” is to live it, and to live it is to give thanks. Gratitude is the game changer.

It took a Samaritan, an outsider, to see that Jesus' healing was about much more than being cured in order to return to the old life. It was about a whole new life. The nine lepers got the healing but not the healer. The Samaritan got both, and gratitude was what tipped the scales. The greater miracle here was not to be healed of leprosy, just as the greatest miracle is not to be healed of any disease or infirmity today. The greatest miracle is when my human heart is healed of ingratitude.

We don't have faith in order to get the blessings. It's not cause and effect. As this story shows, faith is the response to what God has done. God doesn't wait for us to have faith. God acts first, and God's actions lead to faithful response. When we practice gratitude, we find faith given in abundance.

There is a kind of abandonment in gratitude, isn't there? It takes us out of ourselves. The Samaritan threw himself at the feet of Jesus in praise and thankfulness. That was missing for the other nine. They were doubtless as happy as they could be to be healed, but without returning thanks to the healer they weren't whole.

I think of the life of the church. How often do we just go along in our ordinariness, our normalcy – week to week, year to year – worshiping, praying for our friends and ourselves to be

restored to health, going to meetings, giving our money, attending to our spiritual needs and the needs of the organization and our mission – all the things we are called to be about, all good things – and yet not really “seeing” more than the immediate context of our own lives and our life together as the church? It isn’t unusual, for pastors and congregations, particularly when they’ve been together for a long time, to slip into a kind of “Christian ease.” It’s not laziness – and it’s not even becoming too comfortable in our faith and our Christian relationships. As someone has said, it’s more like the difference between swimming in 8 feet of water and in 100 feet of water. You might swim the same in either case. But if you get into trouble it makes a difference knowing how close the bottom is; and the deeper the water the bigger the waves. We “swim along” most of the time as if the bottom were only out of reach by a little, thinking that if we go under we can just push ourselves back up again. Some people – and maybe all of us some of the time, look upon God that way – that God is there for us, and if we just risk a little, let our heads go under a little, or when something pushes us under, faith provides for God to be right there for us.

But really, and Jesus was pretty clear about this, it’s only in the depths where God’s work is effective in and through us. “Push the boat out into the deep,” Jesus told his soon-to-be disciples, “and let your nets out again.” God is in the depths as God is in the heights. God is not just a little out of reach; God is entirely out of reach – for it is not our reach that brings God to us, but God’s reach that brings us to God.

Our Christian confession is that we live in the depths of our own sinfulness, the depths of our fears and selfishness and isolation. That’s where we live. Scripture attests to it on almost every page. And if we don’t know it, and if we’re too comfortable not knowing it, or refusing to know it, then our religion won’t take us any deeper than our toes can reach, or any higher than we can jump. And many of us can’t jump as high as we used to.

If it weren’t for God’s healing, compassionate reach to us, the depths is where we’d stay. There are plenty of ways to live with it – ways to rationalize and surround ourselves with nice things and agreeable people and put our self-esteem in others’ hands and believe that we are what we earn

or what we achieve in this life. We might even know healing and restoration – but it won't bring salvation and transformation.

Life in the church at its best reminds us of that, the limitations of our own self-sufficiency and control of these things. There's always a baby crying to disturb our contemplation. There are the small and petty concerns that seem to sometimes draw us away from our true mission. And yet there are the amazing, loving and sacrificial things that seem to happen almost by accident – and there is the Word of God proclaiming it all good, if sometimes irritating; proclaiming it all redeemed.

And the thing that helps us most to know that we are held close in the depths, and in the heights of life, and that is most pleasing to our God, is our gratitude. The ten lepers knew the depths they were in, way over their heads. They cried to Jesus for mercy, and though all of them were cured, only one of them – the foreigner, the outsider – was healed. When he “saw” that he was healed, Luke says, he turned back to praise God, for he knew of his salvation.

To know of our salvation, to “see” that we are healed and made whole in Jesus Christ is what enabled the Apostle Paul to proclaim that we are to give thanks “always and for everything,” even in our suffering. In a world where we too often assume we have an absolute right to health, happiness and every possible creature comfort – that all of it is to be expected as normal – if we have any Christian faith at all we know that our God is the giver of all things: “every mouthful of food we take, every breath of air we inhale, every note of music we hear, every smile on the face of a friend, a child, a spouse – all that, and a million things more, are good gifts from God's generosity.” (*N.T. Wright, “Luke for Everyone”*)

And so we gather to worship God, not to “get something out of it,” but to give thanks and praise to God. Our stewardship is transformed from fundraising to the glad gratitude of joyful givers. Our mission changes from ethical duty to the work of grateful and open hands, hearts and minds. Our prayer is not just our intercessions and petitions but our thanksgivings at the table of the Lord and gift of the fellowship of believers under the Word of God. For when we give thanks in all things we find that God is in all things.

Karen and I spent a couple of days at the end of the week in Boston with our son who is in graduate school there. Mom really wanted to make his basement room a little more comfortable, though Dale was basically fine with the way it was. We had planned on going Wednesday and coming back on Friday, but Karen wasn't feeling well so we had to wait until Thursday to go, and come back yesterday. Along about noon yesterday I was getting nervous about getting back, and there were just a couple more things to do. I didn't want to get back too late, and so I was getting a bit irritated (I was already missing the SU game!). Then I noticed a post-it note Dale had stuck to the top ledge of his desk, along with several others. It quoted Paul's letter to the Philippians. It said, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." It was a reminder to himself, but the fact that it was there, that he had put it there, that he wanted to be so reminded, that he knows the source of his strength, that he was nurtured in that faith in this place among this people, caused me to return to give thanks to the healer and restorer of souls. It wasn't just about my duty, about my being prepared for another Sunday. Thanksgiving welled up in my heart for the connections across time, for the miracle that is life, for the grace and goodness of our God.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you.