

Thanksgiving

Luke 17:11-19

October 8th, 2023

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

This past week we got a taste of what is to come. Cooler weather, naked trees and angry rain coming from the sky. Soon it will be time to put our children and grandchildren in uncomfortable costumes that are either too big or too small for them and then put a parka over the whole thing so they can barely move and send them door to door in the first snowfall of the season to collect candy. Candy that we will sift through, with a fine-tooth comb and ration out slowly over the next month. Soon we will help our little ones climb the stairs to the neighbours house, ring the bell, and yell "trick or treat". And once they have managed the costume and once the candy has hit the bottom of the pillow case and once they have answered all the lady at the door's 20 questions about their costume - we will lean in, as good parents and grandparents, and listen carefully to hear our blessed little one sing out a hearty "thank you".

That's the way good parents and grandparents are: we want our children and grandchildren to learn to have a sense of thanksgiving in their hearts. Thanksgiving for all things big and small that life offers, and so we begin to teach them to be thankful when they are very young. As soon as they are able to verbalize, we are teaching them to say, thank you and we do our best to help them understand the feelings that are behind the words.

Imagine with me. Everyone has been waiting for the arrival of Grandma and Grandpa and they finally arrive, bringing in a huge carload of Christmas presents for everyone. And the biggest one under the tree this year is for the grandson. It's Christmas eve; he rips into that package; and he discovers a trainset which is immediately set up and he begins playing with it, racing the train around the tracks as fast as he can. Meanwhile, the parents are coaching their boy, "make sure you say thank you to Grandma and Grandpa.".....which the grandchild does with a side hug and shout, as he is happily focused on playing with his new train. The parents and grandparents would like more, more signs of appreciation, but, "oh well."

Imagine with me. It's birthday time and Auntie has sent her annual birthday card to their niece from her faraway city, and the niece tears the envelope open, barely reading the front page of the card and merely glancing at the poem inside as she gathers up the money falling out of the card - the five dollar or ten dollar bill, or maybe a check. The niece is delighted and begins to plan what she will do with the money. She is so very happy that Auntie remembered her birthday in this way. Mother says, "Make sure you write a thank you note to Auntie." A week later, the mother again asks her daughter to write the thank you note, with the same lack of response from her daughter. It is now two weeks later and there is a conflict brewing, Mom is mad, because that note has not been written.

We all want our children and grandchildren and our selves to have this deep feeling of gratitude in life, not out of duty, not out of politeness or being proper. Rather, we want to know the deep felt appreciation for the little and big things of life. We want gratitude to bubble up in our children and grandchildren, we want them to feel the miracle of deep and genuine thanksgiving. We want to feel the miracle of deep and genuine thanksgiving.

In our lesson today Jesus asks “Where are the other nine,” Did I not heal ten lepers? Where are the other nine? Did only one come back to say “thank you?”

Leprosy was the dreaded disease of Jesus’ day. Leprosy was highly contagious. It could come in a mild or serious form. It was mild when it involved red or white blotches on the skin; it was serious when it involved the disintegration of toes and fingers, feet and hands. But both were feared. And the way they treated leprosy was to quarantine you. You were separated from your family and friends, and you lived in a leper colony. You would cover your body with rags, let your hair grow, and no one could come within twelve feet of you. You were untouchable. Leprosy was THE dreaded disease of Jesus’ time.

In the story for today, a group of ten lepers lived in a small leper colony in a small village outside of Jerusalem. Three days before this story unfolded, Jesus had healed a leper and the news had spread and these lepers were hoping that Jesus would come by and perhaps one of them or all of them would be healed. Well, Jesus did come by, and the lepers began shouting to him: “Have mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us. We need your help. We need you.” And Jesus did something unheard of: he crossed the invisible twelve foot boundary and came before each leper and touched them. Everyone was surprised, stunned, or shocked; for Jesus was now contaminated. He then told them to go into Jerusalem to the priests and get a certificate of health that they had been cured. On the way, the lepers noticed their white blotches began to leave them - they were being healed. They were elated. Ecstatic. Free. Off they ran as fast as they could go. To see a husband, a wife, that they hadn’t seen for weeks. To see a son or daughter, a father or mother, a grandfather a grandmother aunt or uncle, they hadn’t seen for months. Off they ran to see their field, their fishing boat, their store, their garden, their oxen that they hadn’t touched for so very long. As fast as they could go, they were so happy to be well after all this time.

The story tells us that only one remembered, only one, returned, fell at Jesus feet, and gave thanks. Jesus asked, “Where are the other nine? Were not ten healed? Where are the other nine? And *only* you, a Samaritan, a foreigner, are you the *only* one to have returned to say thank you. Go in peace. Your faith has made you well.”

Where are the other nine? Perhaps they are just like us. When times are tough we tend to become more religious - we are aware of our need of God. The lepers were shouting, “heal us, Lord; heal us, Lord; we need you; we need you.” “I need you God - especially when my life is all messed up. I need your help, God.” But shortly thereafter,

when the crisis has passed, and life gets back to normal we sometimes forget our need of God.

One scholar said, “the result and irony of the miracle of healing was to drive these lepers away from God.” When they needed God, they were close to God; but when they didn’t need God, they were off - busy being well. The strange irony of the healing was to drive them away from God.

We can speculate that the nine lepers were so busy being well that they forgot God. I can understand that. They had been separated from their family and friends and work due to the quarantine, and now they were free to return to those relationships. And they became busy being well.....gotta rush to see mom and dad, brother and sister, aunt and uncle and the garden and the farm and the shop and the fishing boat, all those people and places we haven’t seen for so long. They were so busy being well, that they no longer had time to feel gratitude or to express thanksgiving.

Many of us understand: being too busy takes over our gratitude and distances us from our God. We hit the floor in the morning running and fall asleep exhausted at night with barely a word of prayer. We are so busy being well.

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. It reminds me of the grandson I mentioned at Christmas time, so busy playing with his new train, that he is not really aware of Grandma and Grandpa who came to see him and spend time with him and love him. Likewise, we, as human beings, can become so busy playing with our little trains of life that we forget the God who has come to visit us, be with us, love us, and see us. That’s the real tragedy of the nine: they missed the true blessing. That is, they got the miracle but didn’t discover the miracle worker who so enormously loves them and wanted healing for them.

The greatest miracle is not perhaps to be healed of leprosy; the greatest miracle might be when my human heart is bathed in gratitude and Thanksgiving and live it always. The miracle is to be filled with daily thanksgiving for countless gifts of love.

Amen.

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