

Sermon – Thanksgiving A (Oct 11th, 2020):
Healings, Outcasts, and Thanksgiving (Luke 17:11-19)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Today, we're going to look at our Gospel Reading from Luke, the story of the Grateful Samaritan. But also, unlike most Sunday worship services, today has a specific theme: gratitude, or Thanksgiving.

A few months ago, a very important and beloved Anglican theologian, known best as J. I. Packer, who taught at Regent College in Vancouver, died at the age 93. Among the wisdom he leaves us with is this advice: "If you ask, 'Why is this happening?' no light may come, but if you ask, 'How am I to glorify God now?' there will always be an answer."

No matter what the circumstances, "How am I to glorify God now?" A good question to ask ourselves, I think.

I mentioned before service that I would normally not preach on Thanksgiving texts, like I am today. Another thing I wouldn't normally do is tell a story like I'm going to, but I think it fits well enough with the theme of gratitude. You might have even heard it before.

"A while back a visiting attended a men's breakfast in the middle of a rural farming area of the country.

The group had asked an older farmer, decked out in bib overalls, to say grace for the morning breakfast.

'Lord, I hate buttermilk,' the farmer began.

The visiting pastor opened one eye to glance at the farmer and wondered where this was going. The farmer loudly proclaimed, 'Lord, I hate lard.' Now the pastor was growing concerned. Without missing a beat, the farmer continued, "And Lord, you know I don't much care for raw white flour." The pastor once again opened an eye to glance around the room and saw that he wasn't the only one to feel uncomfortable.

Then the farmer added, 'But Lord, when you mix them all together and bake them, I do love warm fresh biscuits. So Lord, when things come up that we don't like, when life gets hard, when we don't understand what You're saying to us, help us to just relax and wait until you are done mixing. It will probably be even better than biscuits Amen.'

I think having a *widened* perspective like this is a key part of thanksgiving and gratitude. It isn't getting stuck on what you see before you, especially the little things that you don't like. Gratitude is about taking the time to look closer-in and further-out. Usually, you see a lot more to be thankful for, admire, and appreciate.

The world is often at its best through a telescope, a microscope, or simply by recognizing the gift and beauty of the mundane. Sometimes, we even need to touch, taste, smell our way to the holy and hidden heart of where you're at.

So, gratitude is about more than just thankfulness for one thing or another, or being thankful at a specific time. Gratitude is a *way of being* that frees us to revel in the good gifts of our Creator, who makes good stuff out of bad stuff. Even things we'd go as far to say "we hate," like the farmer in the story.

THE TEXT

Getting into our Gospel Reading, one thing I've noticed about the context in the past is how, at this point in Luke's Gospel Narrative, Jesus is on a long journey to Jerusalem, and it isn't over yet.

Here, though, the important point is that Jesus isn't on a *straight* path to Jerusalem. It's a long and winding road he takes and leads his disciples on, and it also puts them in some *foreign* territory. It isn't so much that they don't know where they are, or that they're necessarily far from home, but things get a little more complicated away from The Holy City of Jerusalem.

The events of today's reading happen as they're "passing along between Samaria and Galilee."

Samaria was where a group of outsiders to pure Hebrew ancestry lived. Because they were considered "impure," or of mixed blood, they were excluded from Jewish religious ceremonies.

Galilee, the other territory mentioned, also wasn't a place people expected anything good to come out of. Little did they know that the only *truly* good thing came from that insignificant place, from Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus the Christ (see John 1:46).

But back on this road to Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples enter a village, and, in this village, they encounter a community of lepers.

We often hear of “lepers” in the Bible, but usually this *isn't* what we know today as Hanson’s disease or leprosy. What we *can* assume, though, is that these are people had a well-known skin disease of the time that left them exiled from their communities and from worshipping YHWH, the one true God, in the Temple in Jerusalem. Without their communities, these “lepers” would create their own, and the communities they created ended up being much more diverse than the so-called “purer” ones they knew before, with all the rules you needed to follow in order to remain in the more racially and culturally exclusive Jewish communities of the time. In a group of lepers, often full of people abandoned and forgotten because they were considered “unclean,” all the other stuff no longer matter. Even Jew and Samaritan lived as one.

Luke, the author of this Gospel, had reason to emphasize a story like this one, and be grateful himself by doing it, since he himself was Greek, a foreigner, a Gentile, but no longer an “outsider” because of Christ, who forms his own community of reconciled humanity through every corner of the earth.

When Jesus and the disciples meet this community of lepers, the lepers “lift up their voices” to Jesus with a familiar plea, “*have mercy on us.*”

The response Jesus has to situations like this is never very predictable. Here is no different, but first let’s reflect on some other situations.

Does he sleep through storms on the open sea, or rebuke them? Or does he ignore the boat altogether and walk on the water?

Are people healed when he anoints them with a holy ointment of *spit* and *dirt*? Or when they turn away believing *his words* are enough? Or is it when they touch the hem of his coat?

Christ does well to redirect us *away from* any formula, but *towards* the mysterious nature of himself.

Here, there isn't much conversation. Jesus looks on the group of lepers with compassion, and gives them simple directions, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

To be honest, they probably didn't have anything better to do, being an isolated community of lepers likely begging at the entrance of the village. But this also wouldn't be an easy journey. The sores all over their bodies would have made it worse, especially if the sores happened to cover their feet. Yet they quickly go on their way. Jesus reminds us elsewhere that it only takes faith the size of a mustard seed. And as they go, stepping out in faith, they're healed.

COMMUNAL RESTORATION

But before getting to the healing part, let's go back to the Jesus telling them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." You might, "Why would they do that?" More to the point, why would Jesus ask them to go to the Temple in Jerusalem and show themselves to the priests *there*?

Well, Jesus is pretty complicated. He doesn't just tell them to go for the fun of it, but has a greater purpose with it. He wants these lepers to be *ritually* clean. Ritually clean so that they can be *restored* to their communities and able to worship fully and rightly again. Their leprosy isolated and barred them from these things, and they wouldn't be allowed back just because they *appeared* to be cured of their disease. If they wanted to be *full participants* again, they needed to go through the proper procedures. They needed the priests to declare them clean again.

That might not sound like something Jesus would care too deeply about, since he was fulfilling the Law on their behalf, and bringing forgiveness freely through himself. But knowing that showing themselves to the priest would *restore* them to their *communities*, in the here-and-now, should help us to understand.

This wasn't about priestly authority, or maintaining all the Jewish rituals, customs, and traditions. We talked about that stuff a bit last week. But Jesus was interested in their *communal restoration*. This was a much more communal, less individualistic society than our own, and Jesus didn't want them to be healed but alone. He

wanted these lepers to be more than just *physically* cured, but able to go home to their loved ones and be welcomed again.

But this brings up an issue that gets more to the heart of this event, which maybe you already noticed.

One of the ten *couldn't* be restored like the others. One of them wasn't *allowed* to go to the priests in Jerusalem, and had no way of becoming part of God's Chosen People. *The Samaritan*. The outsider among on the outcasts. The one with impure bloodlines.

This Samaritan had no way, *until* Jesus walked by their little community of outcasts, on the road between two insignificant places, and granted this Samaritan mercy and healing.

Like a seemingly unimportant baby born in Bethlehem, something more was happening. For the Samaritan, this miracle he received from Christ was of a much greater significance than *just* a miraculous healing, if there is such a thing.

Yes, the Samaritan got up and walked towards the Priests like the others, but the Samaritan would never get past the outer gates of the Temple. But they didn't need to wait till they reached the Temple in Jerusalem to be healed. They were all healed *on their way*, and it makes a certain kind of sense that only the Samaritan turned back to thank Jesus. It would mean more to a Samaritan than the others. It would be easier for a Samaritan to appreciate the act, and appreciate the moment as well. The Samaritan recognizes Jesus made a way *for him*, a way that didn't exist before, and it was all in, with, and through Christ himself.

Ultimate reconciliation was at hand. So, the Samaritan probably thought it would be a good idea to turn back and give thanks for it. The Samaritan must have recognized, through faith, that *a greater story* was being told, much like another Samaritan did, the woman at the well, who couldn't help but share the news with her village after encountering Christ and hearing about the living water from which you will never go thirsty again.

The Bible is full of stories where boundaries are shattered, not to be rebellious, but to usher-in the renewed Kingdom of God, where the dividing walls of hostility are broken down.

GRATITUDE AND ENTITLEMENT

The nine Hebrew lepers that didn't return to give thanks didn't go against Jesus' instructions by not going back. But they do display a greater sense of entitlement by this action, or *inaction*. They were, after all, part of God's Chosen People already. Once they were healed and declared clean, they likely thought they were good to go. They could get things back to normal. But "back to normal" wasn't what Jesus was doing, nor is it what he continues to do today.

The presence of the Samaritan, an outcast among outcasts, among those healed was a sign. A sign only the Samaritan seemed to recognize. So, the Samaritan ends up displaying a greater faith, not just that Jesus *can* heal, but that Jesus is *The Healer. The Restorer. The One True King. The Christ.*

But also in general, those who know what it's like to be exiled, abandoned, sick, or alone appreciate it so much more when things are restored, or even just a little bit better. We're stubborn creatures in our fallenness, and learn from pain truths we refuse to learn from joy, so that the truly righteous among us aren't those who "have it all," but those who recognize and appreciate what they have, and give thanks.

It's hard for us to do this, to be thankful. We tend to focus on what we don't have until we get it, and then, once we get it, we want the next thing.

So, we desire things like marriage, only to want kids, and then quickly desire independence instead. We want a good job, and then wish we could change it. Or we have good work but long for more leisure. Once we find rest, we're restless for action. Once we're done with one trial, we expect another.

It goes on and on. Why do we so easily ignore our many deliverances? How often do we stop to appreciate our many gifts and advantages? What would our world look like today if we had just a bit more gratitude? More gratitude in general, but especially towards our Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer.

THANKSGIVING

That's why Thanksgiving is an important holiday, and it should be thought of as such—a day set-apart, holy, a *feast*.

It isn't a time to *ignore* all the bad in our lives and the world around us, especially with all the challenges we currently face. But is a time to stop and reflect on all the good we receive. Even if celebrations might be subdued for many of us this year, I know we all have a lot to be thankful for.

May we carry gratitude with us throughout the year. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.