

October 9, 2022. Thanksgiving

Proper 28 (Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7; Psalm 66; [2 Timothy 2:8–15;] Luke 17:11–19)

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Happy Thanksgiving! The world outside is at its loveliest, our families gather to celebrate together and here we are on this gorgeous day, surrounded by all this fall beauty. Appropriately, our gospel reading is about gratitude. But instead of painting a picture of beautiful things, this story is about people dying a slow death from a thoroughly repulsive, ugly and horrible disease.

Leprosy really was a slow death: it took 20 or even 30 years to die, during which time pieces of the body decay and drop off. The body would slowly rot away, starting from the skin and working inwards. Sufferers become horribly disfigured, and the smell was terrible.

In Biblical times, nobody knew what caused leprosy, but it was not like any other disease or affliction, so they believed that it must be a punishment from God. The Hebrew word for leprosy was “stricken.” And if only God could strike a person with leprosy, then it followed that only God could cure it.

Lepers were not allowed to be around other people. It wasn’t just that you were contagious: the real stigma was being “stricken”: if God was punishing you, there must be a reason for it, so everyone else had to shun you. Your life was over.

Lepers travelled in small groups, begging for their food. To warn other people not to come close, they rang little bells. But these ten lepers who approached Jesus, weren’t just begging for food. They wanted more: they wanted “mercy.” They wanted to be spared from their punishment; they wanted to have their lives back. And Jesus told them to go show themselves to the priest.

Now that’s not as offhand as it sounds. In ancient Hebrew society, priests acted as health officials for the community – because there wasn’t anybody else to do the job. It was the priest who declared someone to be a leper, and only a priest could declare that someone was healed. If Jesus had just healed the lepers on the spot, they would still have to go and see a priest to get the all-clear before they could rejoin their family and community.

But Jesus didn’t heal them on the spot. They had to get up and get going before the healing happened. They had to trust Jesus enough to take the first step themselves. They could have just shrugged their shoulders and said “Well, so much for that. We asked but he didn’t do anything.” Maybe they would still have been healed anyway, maybe not. We don’t know.

Jesus told them to behave as if they were already healed; he told them to walk in faith. He didn’t say that walking in faith would lead to healing; he just told them to behave as if they were already healed. And they did! All ten of them. They all believed enough to start walking to the priest to get the all-clear. They all set off to do what he said, as if they had already been healed and somewhere along the way, they **were** healed.

But only one came back to say thank you. The others were probably excited at getting their lives back, seeing their families again; holding their children again; re-joining their communities. They could do all that – but only after the priest had pronounced them clean, so they needed to hurry. And they forgot their manners. Understandable. In the circumstances, it seems a bit unkind of Jesus to even mention it.

But there are some very subtle uses of language in this passage that don't come through well in English, but which help to explain what he was saying.

- In v. 15, the leper realized that he was "healed." The Greek word there is a very specific medical term meaning "mended" – like a broken bone.
- In v. 17, Jesus says ten were "made clean." The Greek word there means "purified," - what the priest would say to declare them free of disease.
- And in v. 19, Jesus says that the one leper was "made well." The Greek word there means "saved."

So, all ten of the lepers were "made clean" but only one was "made well." All ten were cured, but only one was saved. The difference between just being **cured** and being **saved** was in that little act of thanking God. All ten were cured, but only one accepted the second gift of being blessed by a new relationship with God.

Gratitude has to come from the heart. Imagine if those other 9 lepers had still been close enough for Jesus to shout out "You're welcome!" when they didn't bother to thank him. They might have said "Thank-you" then, but it wouldn't be the same, would it? Gratitude that only comes after a prompt is not really gratitude at all. It's not sincere. It's just a polite reaction, delivered grudgingly. Genuine gratitude is a frame of mind. And because that one leper had gratitude in his heart, he was not only physically cured but spiritually saved as well.

Jesus wasn't complaining about bad manners. He wasn't being petulant because 9 people out of 10 didn't say "thank-you" when they should have. He was sad because 9 out of 10 people didn't thank God for the gift they had been given.

Nine out of ten. That's probably what we might still expect. Not everyone has a grateful heart. Not everyone recognizes gifts as gifts.

- A grateful heart appreciates the simple ordinary blessings of life – the things we often take for granted until we lose them.
- A grateful heart sees the blessings hidden in unlikely places, and the little joys that ease our sorrows.
- A grateful heart sets out every day in faith, believing and trusting, as if its griefs and sorrows were already healed, and along the way, they are healed.

The cultivation of a grateful heart changes our outlook on life; focussing on what we can be thankful for is life-giving and beneficial. Social scientists at the University of Miami tested this once by asking three groups of people to keep daily diaries. Group 1 was given no direction; they wrote whatever they liked. Group 2 was asked to write down only what had gone wrong that day, and Group 3 was to write down only the good things from the day. Group 3 ended up emotionally happier **and** physically healthier than the other two groups. Being grateful for the good things, instead of dwelling on the bad, was good for them.

Thinking back to the reading from Jeremiah, the message was just that. The prophet was speaking to people who were being forcibly removed from their homes and taken to another country to live in exile. And he told them to make the best of it. Don't misery over the bad stuff: plant gardens, have children, do your best to benefit the place where you are living, and it will benefit you too.

We have so much to be thankful for that we couldn't possibly list it all. But it would do us good to try; to take a few moments every morning to give thanks for the new day, and a few moments at the end of the day

to give thanks for just two or three specific blessings of that day, to start us on the path of cultivating the grateful heart.

I heard a story recently about a disastrous oil spill that happened just half a mile from the beach of a small coastal village. The local people held a prayer vigil to pray that the oil wouldn't land on their beach. The grouchy local who was telling the story added "But it didn't do anything. The next day the wind changed and swept the most of the oil out to sea. It wasn't a miracle. It was just luck."

Really? I wonder what he thought a miracle would look like?