

“REMEMBERING: III - TO GIVE THANKS”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Thanksgiving Sunday

Luke 17:11-19

Have you ever done something nice for someone and never gotten thanks for it? It could have been something little, like opening a door for someone going into a store, or letting someone merge into the traffic lane in front of your car. Doesn't it just irritate you a little bit when your kindness goes unacknowledged? I'll admit that it irritates me. I mean, how hard would it be just to say thanks for opening the door, or give a wave of the hand to thank me for letting them move their car in front of mine. I'll confess to you how easy it is to mutter under my breath, when no thanks comes my way, "You're welcome!"

Don't you like to have people acknowledge it when you do something nice for them? Doesn't it make you feel good? And admit it, doesn't it hurt a little bit, when your good actions are totally ignored?

Well, if that's the way it feels to us when we do little things for someone else, imagine how much it must have hurt Jesus when what he did for those ten lepers was largely ignored. And what he did was by no means a little thing - it was huge - absolutely, positively life-changing for all of them.

Let's revisit the story. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he was on the outskirts of a village, from far off, ten lepers cried out to him. They asked for his mercy, they needed his healing touch.

Remember the plight of the lepers in those days. They are total outcasts from the rest of society. Through no fault of their own, save the fact that they had this horrid disease, the rest of the world shunned them. They were made to live on their own. Others were forbidden to be near them, not just because of their disease but because they were deemed unclean to be around - inside and out. They had nothing and no one but each other - living in misery, alone and afraid.

And now Jesus comes along, and they see the light at the end of their dark, dark tunnel. If they could only get his attention, perhaps he could heal them and then life would begin again. He was their only hope, and so on that fateful day, they cried out to him.

And he heard their cries. He told them to go and show themselves to the priests and as they turned away from him to go and do as he said, suddenly, in the blink of an eye, they were made clean. Totally and completely healed.

I don't know about you, but I think that would have stopped me in my tracks. You just don't keep on walking the same way, doing the same things, when your life has been made brand new.

Yet, that's exactly what nine of them did. They kept on walking away from Jesus, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he had saved their lives. They just kept on walking.

All except one. One of them turned back, came to Jesus, laid down at his feet and thanked him with exuberance. He knew. He knew that his life had been changed forever, that he had a new life with endless possibilities laid out in front of him, and all he could do was say "thank you" to the one who made it happen.

No doubt, Jesus was touched by his thankfulness. And clearly, Jesus was irritated by the nine others who ignored him and walked on. And probably not just irritated, but sad as well.

Friends, you and I have heard this story over and over again over the years. And I suspect that, every time we hear it, we squirm a little. Because as much as we would hope to be like the Samaritan who stopped, turned back and thanked Jesus for his mercies, we're afraid, aren't we, that we might be one of the ones who just kept on walking.

Oh, it's not that we're not grateful, it's just that, well, we've got our mind on other things. Life, for instance. Life gets in the way. We've got places to go, people to see, things to do, schedules to keep. As one pastor put it, "So often we are like those nine lepers who forgot to say thanks. We are so busy, spread so thin. We are stretched out and stressed out. We are so frazzled with all the things we have to do, need to do, and want to do that we just can't find the time to stop and say thanks to our Lord for what he has done for us." (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, p. 19)

Even if our thanks is due to the fact that we have been healed, even then, sometimes, once we're back on our feet, even then, we forget to give thanks. Life just has a way of taking over and we get swept right back into it all and we leave the Lord behind.

So maybe that's why the nine lepers just kept on going. Sure, they were

happy to be healed, but now they had things to do, places to go, people to see, a life to begin again. Maybe they just got swept back into it all and that's why they forgot, and left the Lord behind.

Or there might have been another reason. Sometimes we forget to give thanks, because we still have problems. Oh, one problem might have been solved, but there are still others. That could have been the case with those lepers. They, in fact, still did have problems. They had to get back into "normal" society, they had to re-establish themselves, make homes for themselves, find work. Life was changed, but certainly still not easy for them.

Sometimes we fail to stop and give thanks, because, though something good has happened, there's still an awful lot going on. Sometimes, in the midst of everything, we fail to see the grace.

I read an old Hebrew saying this week that goes like this: "No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there's always a thread of grace." (On-line, sermonillustrations.com)

That one leper saw the thread of grace, the other nine didn't.

I once heard about another man who saw the thread of grace. He was a Scottish pastor named Alexander Whyte. Whyte was well-known for the uplifting prayers he offered in worship. He always seemed to find something for which to be grateful. One Sunday morning, the weather in Scotland was horrible - dark, windy, rainy. One church member leaned over and whispered to another, "I'll bet the pastor won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord for on a wretched day like this!" Much to his surprise, however, Alexander Whyte began his prayer by saying, "We thank thee, O God, that it is not always like this." (On-line, sermonillustrations.com)

Now, there's a man who, like the one leper, saw the thread of grace.

I might have told you before about another man who did as well. His name was Martin Rinkert, and he was a minister at the time of the Thirty Years War. He survived that horrible time. He was spared from death by sword or plague, but even as his life was saved, he had to officiate the funerals of over 4000 people, including his wife. It was a horrible time for him. Yet, do you know that he wrote one of the most well-known Thanksgiving hymns of all - "Now Thank We All Our God" at the end of that war? He saw the thread of grace, and thanked God for it, in spite of everything that was going on. He wrote, "Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom our world rejoices, who from our mothers' arms, has blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love and still is ours today."

I think that one leper would be singing that song, wouldn't he? No matter what the road ahead looked like, no matter what troubles he would face trying to re-enter life, still he thanked God for all his blessings.

So, first, some of the lepers failed to give God thanks because they were too busy, too concerned with themselves; and secondly, perhaps some of them failed to give God thanks because they were still focused on what was wrong.

No matter the reason, I have a feeling that one day all of them would remember that they had forgotten to turn back and thank Jesus. I have a feeling that one day all of them would regret not taking the opportunity to fall at his feet and thank him.

Life has a way of doing that, you know. You go along, and everything's just right, and then, all of a sudden, something happens, and you have a whole lot of time to think about life, and what matters, and who matters.

Let me tell you about someone who experienced that first-hand. Her name is Mary Chapin Carpenter - a singer, some of you may know her name, and know her music. A number of years ago she suffered a pulmonary embolism. She went to the emergency room after suffering from serious chest pains, and they diagnosed the embolism and treated it, which was very fortunate for her, because that can be deadly if not treated quickly.

Yet, even though she was cured, Mary Chapin Carpenter was not only, not grateful, she became depressed. These are her words: "Everything I had been looking forward to came to a screeching halt. I had to cancel my upcoming tour. I had to let my musicians and crew members go. I felt that I had let everyone down. But there was nothing to do but get out of the hospital, go home and get well. I tried hard to see my unexpected time off as a gift, but I would open a novel and couldn't concentrate. I would turn on the radio, then shut it off. Familiar clouds gathered above my head, and I couldn't make them go away with a pill or a movie or a walk. This unexpected time was becoming a curse, filling me with anxiety, and self-loathing. All of the ingredients of the darkness that is depression."

No matter what, Mary couldn't see the thread of grace running through her life. She couldn't celebrate her healing. Until one day, one fateful day. It happened at the grocery store. Her words again: "One morning, the young man who rang up my groceries and asked me if I wanted paper or plastic, also told me to enjoy the rest of my day. I looked at him, and I knew he meant it. It stopped me in my tracks. I went out and I got in my car and cried. What I want, more than ever, is to appreciate that I have this day, and tomorrow and hopefully days beyond that. I am experiencing the learning curve of gratitude. I don't want to say, 'Have

a nice day,” like a robot. I don’t want to get mad at the elderly driver in front of me. I don’t want to go crazy when my internet access is messed up. I don’t want to be jealous of someone else’s success. You could say that this litany of sins indicates that I don’t want to be human. The learning curve of gratitude, however, is showing me exactly how human I am.”

It was a unique moment in Carpenter’s life, that seemingly innocent moment in the grocery store when a worker wished her a good day - yet, it was a moment infused with God’s grace - a moment when she saw the thread of grace running through her life. It was her “one leper” moment - when she stopped in her tracks and remembered to give thanks.

Sometimes life does that to us. I hope those other nine lepers had one of those moments too - when they suddenly remembered, and dropped to their knees to give God thanks for his healing power.

Mary Chapin Carpenter didn’t just stop at that moment. She took that moment as an invitation to live a grateful life, and she did it one step at a time. After that moment in the grocery store, she decided to intentionally live a grateful life, and started in small ways. She writes: “Tonight I will cook dinner, tell my husband how much I love him, curl up with the dogs, watch the sun go down over the mountains and climb into bed. I will think about how uncomplicated it all is. I will wonder at how it took me my entire life to appreciate just one day.” (On-line, “Sermons That Work,” Thanksgiving Day, Year A, The Rev. Dr. Joseph Pagano)

Maybe that’s the way you and I should start to be more grateful - just take it one step at a time. Take the time to stop and look around and see all the blessings God has given us. Look at your husband, your wife, your family. Be thankful when you’re making lunch or dinner, that you have lunch or dinner to make. Go to work and be glad that you have work to do. Take a deep breath and give thanks for good health. Look at the sun, or the clouds, or even the rain, and thank God you’re alive to experience it.

You and I are so blessed, no matter what we’re going through right now. You and I are blessed. May we never be so busy, or so stressed, or so self-absorbed, that we can’t take the time to stop, kneel at the feet of Jesus, and say thanks. May it be so.

Amen.