

“BEYOND BLESSED”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
November 20, 2016

Psalm 100

Luke 17:11-19

I got something amazing in the mail not too long ago! It’s something I rarely get, and when I sat down to open it, it made my day! What was it? A thank you note from a couple whose wedding I attended in Pennsylvania about six months ago! Imagine that, a thank you note!

Now, I know I sound sarcastic, but here’s why. I can’t tell you the number of showers and weddings I’ve attended in recent years, or for that matter the birthday or Christmas gifts I’ve given, and I never got a thank you note. Now, I’m not saying I expect a handwritten thank you note for every gift I give, it would just be nice to have an acknowledgement that the person did indeed receive the gift.

And if not having my gifts appreciated or even acknowledged irritates me, imagine how much more having the gifts he gave not be acknowledged must have irritated Jesus – or worse, hurt him. Well, we don’t have to imagine, because there’s a record of just such a thing happening in this morning’s Gospel lesson.

Jesus gave the greatest gift of all in that lesson – the gift of life. For there were ten people who were victims of one of the most horrible diseases of all in Jesus’s day – leprosy – who came to him for healing. We cannot possibly imagine how being stricken with this disease affected their lives. It was a hideously painful disease, not only physically painful, but emotionally painful. Because the disease drove them away from other people. They were shunned, outcast, forced to live only with other lepers – away from their families. Unable to work, they were pitifully poor. As I said, we cannot possibly understand what their lives were like.

So when they heard Jesus was going to pass by, they knew he was their only chance. The only way life would change for them would be by his hand. So when he drew near, they, out of respect for him, kept their distance, but nonetheless shouted out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” And blessedly, he stopped and spoke to them, telling them to what to do to be made whole again. “Go and show yourselves to the priest.”

Which is just what they did, and when they did, thanks be to God, they were healed – totally and completely healed. And just like that, in the blink of an eye, their lives totally changed. No longer would people turn away from them, no longer would they have to be separated from the crowds, no longer would they have to be

away from their loved ones, no longer would they be unable to work, and thanks to be God, no longer would they suffer agonizing pain. They were, in that moment, set free to experience a new life, an abundant life, a full and free life!

And then, off they went! Just like that! No turning back. Off they went, probably to dance in the streets, to hug their loved ones, to sit down at a table with friends, to go back to their homes from which they'd been expelled. Off they went, never looking back.

Off they went, save one of them. One of them did turn back. One of them remembered that this new life had come at the hands of one person – and his name was Jesus – and he wanted to thank him. And so overwhelmed with gratitude was he, that he lay down prostrate on the ground in front of Jesus in grateful thanksgiving.

Jesus was moved by this man's gratitude, but he also questioned why he alone had returned. Why the others hadn't praised God for their healing? But that questioning didn't stop him from giving another blessing to the thankful ex-leper. He said, "Get up now and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

You know what? I know that the people to whom I give gifts and from whom I don't get thank you notes are not bad people. I know they're busy, I know they get distracted, and I know they probably enjoyed the gifts, but life just has a way of moving on, and we forget. And I believe that Jesus knew that these lepers that he healed were good people, and were so filled with joy at facing a new life, that they couldn't wait to get to it, and they forgot to turn and give thanks. Still it was so disappointing to him.

But then there was that one – the one who did remember, who did turn around, who did deeply thank him. You know, I think there might have been more than one reason he remembered. Surely, he was grateful for the healing – there can be no doubt about that. But did you happen to hear one particular line in the scripture passage – it said, "And he was a Samaritan."

We've heard about Samaritans before, haven't we, particularly in a little thing called "the parable of the Good Samaritan." We know that the Samaritans were outsiders, foreigners, enemies of the Jews. We know that Jews and Samaritans would cross the street to avoid encountering one another. We know that they looked upon each other with skepticism and anger.

So this leper, this Samaritan leper – might it be that he knew he was doubly blessed that day – that not only did Jesus heal him of his disease, but he healed an outsider – someone that other Jews would have ignored? He not only didn't cross

the street to avoid him, he treated him like everyone else, and walked him into new life just like the other nine, who were Jews.

No wonder this man was grateful. In so many ways he had been ostracized – because of his illness and because of his nationality – and in one fell swoop, Jesus treated him just like everyone else – as a beloved child of God worthy of a full and healthy life. No wonder his heart was bursting with gratitude – no wonder he remembered to return to Jesus and pour out his thanks.

Dear friends, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, this scripture lesson provides us with a mirror in which to look at ourselves, and think about how we are or aren't people who say thanks enough. I hope we're more like the one healed man, rather than the nine who forgot to say thanks, but I'm afraid that, too easily, we're like them.

And here's why I say that. First, because I think that, in times of need and crisis, we're all over Jesus, praying, crying, pleading; but when the crisis is over, we go on our merry way and forget.

Some of you may remember a woman by the name of Dale Evans. She was Roy Rogers' wife. Well, one day she was in England and attended a communion service in an old cathedral in London. There were seven people present – seven. She asked an English friend why so few were there, and this is what he said: "Well, it's like this: we English are a nation of crisis. We are at our best in a crisis situation. Then we get on our knees and ask God to help us. After the crisis has passed, we thank him for help and go on our way again," until, and these are not his words, another crisis happens.

Now, I don't think that's so different from a lot of us. In times of need, we're close to the Lord, but when times are good and there's smooth sailing, maybe not so much. It's not that we don't love him, it's just that we don't spend as much time with him, or remember to thank him as we did when times were tough.

Secondly, I don't think we thank the Lord as much as we should because we take what we have for granted, we fail to notice just how blessed we are. Face it, you and I are incredibly blessed. Incredibly. Every single day of our lives, and we get so used to it, that we forget to thank God for it.

"We're like," as one pastor put it, "the world traveler who has been everywhere and seen everything and takes for granted the blessing and beauty of all that he has seen. We have become so accustomed to our blessings that they fail to excite us and generate thankfulness, for we take them for granted."

He continues, “Emerson said that if the stars came out only once a year, everybody would stay up all night to behold them. We have seen the stars so often that we don’t bother to look at them anymore. In like manner, we have grown accustomed to our blessings, and quite frankly, we’ve become spoiled.” (On-line, “Giving Thanks,” David Washburn, sermoncentral.com)

Isn’t that the truth? When I read that, I thought about this week when I was driving down High Street to come to the church for a night meeting, and right in front of me, was that incredible Super Moon we experienced for a few days. It took my breath away – but you know what friends, it’s the same moon that’s in the sky every night! We just take it for granted!

Well, a third reason we fail to give stop and give thanks to the Lord, I think, is that we tend to only give thanks for the good things he gives us. And while that is good, it’s not a bad idea to remember that sometimes good comes from the tough things we experience as well.

I laughed when I read a little story about a boy who figured that out pretty early in his life. Here’s his story. One Sunday, his Sunday School teacher asked the class what they were thankful for, and this little eight year old blurted out, “I’m thankful I wear glasses.” (Now, you wouldn’t hear that from many kids, or adults – including me - for that matter!) The teacher was intrigued and asked, “Well, why is that?” The boy answered, “Because it keeps the older boys from fighting with me and it keeps the girls from kissing me.” (On-line, “Thankful People Don’t . . .,” John Roy, sermoncentral.com)

You gotta smile when you hear that! Being thankful for the good and the not so good, as well. So, in the words of another writer, perhaps we should –

Be thankful when we don’t know something, it gives us an opportunity to learn.

Be thankful for difficult times, they help us to grow.

Be thankful for our limitations, because they give us opportunities for improvement.

Be thankful for each new challenge, for they will build strength and character.

Be thankful for our mistakes, for they will teach us valuable lessons.

And, be thankful when we're tired and weary, because it means we've made a difference. (On-line, "Thanksgiving in a Land of Plenty," Joel W. Lohr, sermoncentral.com)

I've never really thought much about being thankful for tough times, but that list really made me think about doing so. In so many ways, in good ways and what seem to us to be not so good ways, God blesses us – and we ought always to give him thanks and praise.

Friends, this week it will be easy for us to, as the scripture says, "turn back and remember to give thanks to the Lord," because this week, even people who never do that, do it. So will we, as well. But may we never stop. May we continue, long after the day of Thanksgiving passes, to be like that one leper, always remembering to give thanks to the God who is the source of everything we have been given – the source of all of our gifts.

So, let me close with one more short story. A pastor named David Lose had a colleague, who, every time someone asked her "How are you?" her answer would be "I am grateful." Not, "fine," or "pretty good" or "great," but every time her answer was "I am grateful." Pastor Lose said of her, "She chose her words with care. She wanted to make a point. That gratitude is not only a response to good fortune, but also a choice we make – a choice to see those blessings, name them, and express our gratitude in word and deed." (On-line, "Gratitude and Grace," David Lose, In the Meantime)

So my friends, how are you today? "I am grateful."

How are you today? "I am grateful."

How are you today? "I am grateful."

Then, in the words of Jesus, as the service ends, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well." Thanks be to God.

Amen.