

“BEING THE ONE”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
November 22, 2015

Thanksgiving Sunday

Psalm 65

Luke 17:11-19

How did you feel as you heard that Gospel story? Were you shocked by how it ended? Were you surprised by it? Sad to say, most of us, probably were neither shocked nor surprised by it. People forgetting to say “thank you” seems to be pretty commonplace these days. It’s seems it’s just that kind of world.

The kind of world where it’s nothing to hear people talking out loud in movie theatres and concert halls. The kind of world where people push their way to the front of lines without apology. The kind of world I witnessed the other day in a drive thru line. This particular drive thru had two lines, and apparently two cars went for the same line at the same time, and I swear, with all the screaming and yelling they did at each other, I thought the drivers were going to get out of their cars and have a fist fight! All over a place in a drive thru line, all to get to the window for a Big Mac first! It’s crazy! And don’t even get me started on cell phone etiquette or the lack thereof!

It’s that kind of world, and it’s the kind of world where it seems that, a lot of the time, saying thank you is a lost art. I’m always amazed when I open a door for a person to go through and they don’t even acknowledge it, let alone say “thank you.” I mean, how hard would that be? Two little words. Thank. You.

And my real pet peeve is thank you notes. Now, I get that people don’t send thank you notes for a lot of things, but for some reason, I feel like big occasions, like weddings, in particular, warrant thank you notes for gifts. I can’t tell you the number of weddings I’ve attended in the past few years where I’ve given the couple a gift or a check and gotten absolutely no acknowledgement of it. Nothing! Nada!

What is the message they are sending to me, the giver? Is it that they just expected it from me? (Hmmm – I wonder if they would have noticed if I **didn’t** give them something?) Or maybe they didn’t like what I gave them or I didn’t give them a big enough check, and they didn’t know what to say in the note? Or maybe they got so wrapped up in the honeymoon and then settling into their new life, that they got too busy? Maybe they were never taught the art of writing thank you notes. Or maybe someone said to them, “Oh, you don’t have to follow those rules of etiquette any more – that’s old school.”

Well, whatever the reason, not getting a thank you hurts. It's like being told what you did was no big deal, it really didn't matter to the recipient.

Now, compare receiving a wedding gift to receiving life-changing healing from a horrid disease, and it's absolutely astounding that the recipients in the Gospel story did not say thank you! Absolutely astounding!

The people to whom Jesus told this story would have been shocked by the ending, unlike us, for they lived in a world of convention and custom, of etiquette and rules. They knew what you were supposed to do and when you were supposed to do it.

They also knew, all too well, the realities of a horrid disease called leprosy. They knew what having leprosy meant for the life of a person stricken with it. It meant they were cast out of society. It meant horrible, wrenching pain and disfigurement. It was, possibly, the worst thing that could strike a person in that day and age. It made that person an outcast, an outsider – separated from the rest of society. No one wanted to be near you or would be near you. It was a horrible, horrible existence.

So when Jesus came down the road, making his way from Samaria to Galilee, those ten lepers knew this was their chance. They had heard about him, the way he was healing people, so they knew this was their best chance. The scripture says they kept their distance – they had learned how to live that way – to stay away from people because of the smell and ugliness of their disease. They called out to him in desperation – “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Imagine what that sounded like – He was their only hope!

Jesus saw them, he heard them, and like he always did for people who were hurting, he stopped for them, and he told them what they needed to do – to go and show themselves to the priests, and they would be healed.

And that's exactly what they did – they turned away from him, to walk to the priests, and they walked into a new life of healing and wholeness, a life of being reunited with society, of being seen as normal again.

We cannot underestimate what a powerful thing was this healing of these lepers! They went from agonizing pain to no pain, they went from being separated from society to being back in the fold, they went from people being afraid of them to people embracing them. It was absolutely, positively incredible!

And yet, only one of them, said thank you to Jesus. One, out of ten. One! Oh, if I get upset about not getting a thank you note for a wedding gift, it's hard to imagine how hurt Jesus was at this. He changed their lives, and the majority of them couldn't take even a second to say thank you.

Now, I know, I know there are probably a million reasons why they didn't. And I know that they probably weren't horrible people, they were probably people

just like you and me. For centuries, people have speculated why those nine didn't say thank you. The reasons could have been many – that they were so excited to be healed they immediately ran to join their loved ones; or they were so thrilled to be able to move without pain that they just took off as fast as their healed, pain-free legs could carry them. Others have speculated that some of them may have forgotten how to say thank you, because for so long they had nothing for which to be thankful, their suffering had been so severe, and no one had bothered to care for them at all. And still others think that maybe some of those healed lepers didn't turn around to thank Jesus because they were in a blur – they didn't quite know how to deal with this sudden turnaround of events – how to re-enter a world that had, seconds before, hated them.

Any of those things could have been true. Any of those things could have been the reason that those nine didn't say thanks – but does that make it right? No. And that's what Jesus was saying to his audience that day, and to us this day.

Which is why he praised the one man who did return and offer thanks. It probably only took a few seconds for that man to do that, yet it touched Jesus for eternity. Interestingly, did you notice who he was? He was a Samaritan, an outsider, a foreigner. You may remember from other lessons, particularly the Good Samaritan, that Samaritans were serious enemies of the Jews – they hated each other – so in both the story of the Good Samaritan and this story, the hero is a person Jesus' audience would have hated. Even more shocking, then, that he was the one to return thanks. An outcast (a Samaritan) among the outcasts (the lepers).

Well, suffice it to say, though we might not be shocked by the ending of this story, the people who heard Jesus tell it that day surely were. One man out of ten returned to give thanks, and that one man was a Samaritan.

It's incredibly sad, but you know what? It's also possible that this incredibly sad story brought about some good in the end, because sometimes things like this compel us to sit up and take notice, and change our ways. Sometimes hearing things like this, or seeing things like this, brings our own actions into sharp focus and we see with clarity who we are and how we act, and realize whether or not we need to change our own ways.

I read this week about a pastor who experienced something like this, where someone's actions helped put his own life in focus. His name was Pastor Jack Hinton and he was on a short-term mission trip in 1996 to a leper colony on the island of Tabango. He was leading a worship service, and there was time for one more song before the service was to end, so he asked if anyone had a request.

A woman who had been facing away from the pulpit turned around. Hinton said that hers was the most hideous face he had ever seen. The woman's nose and ears were entirely gone, and the disease had destroyed her lips as well. He said she lifted a fingerless hand in the air and asked, "Can we sing 'Count Your Many Blessings'?"

So overcome with emotion was he by her request, that he could hardly speak. Pastor Hinton nodded his head and the pianist began to play, but the pastor could hardly sing, let alone keep himself together. After the service, one of his team members said to him, “I guess you’ll never be able to sing that song again,” to which Hinton replied, “Oh yes I will, but I’ll never sing it the same way again.” (On-line, “A Lifestyle of Thanksgiving,” Andy Cook)

Sometimes moments like that, when a person who has every right to question God instead wants to thank Him for her blessings, or when a person who has been healed remembers to thank God when everyone else doesn’t bother – sometimes moments like that can touch our hearts, and wake us up, and cause us to be more thankful. Hopefully!

I would think it’s fair to say that all of us could do better when it comes to giving thanks. All of us have had those moments when we’ve forgotten, or we take for granted the things we have. All of us are crazy busy, and sometimes in the rush of things, we just forget or think we’ll do it later. And all of us probably fail to remember how hurtful it is to the giver when we do forget to say thanks.

We can do better. Jesus calls us to do better. It’s something we need to be intentional about. It’s something we need to cultivate within ourselves. It’s something we can work on every day and we can do it in small and simple ways.

Start out the day with a word of thanks, before your feet even hit the floor. “Thank you Lord, for waking me up, for a new day, for the heat in my house that’s keeping me warm, the water in the shower that will wake me up and cleanse me, for a job that I’m going to go to, for family and friends who love me” before you even get out of bed.

Another simple thing – say grace before your meals. Even if it’s just the grace you learned as a child, “God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food.”

When someone does something kind, take the time to say “thank you.” When they hold a door open for you, or hand something to you, or let you go ahead of them in line. “Thank you.”

Keep a gratitude list, or gratitude journal. I saw an idea on line this week of a gratitude jar, where persons are invited every single day to write down one thing that blessed them that day on a little slip of paper and put it in that jar, and then at the end of the year, look back on all of the blessings God has poured into their lives. I would add something to that, I would say it would be a good thing to have on bad days, days when everyone and everything seems to be against you – go to the jar, and remember and thank God for the blessings.

There are a million different things you can do to cultivate a spirit of thankfulness in your life, but it’s up to you to do them. It’s your choice. But what you will discover as you live more thankfully is what Jesus helped his listeners

discover on that day long ago – thankfulness leads to a joyful life, an abundant life, a full life, the life that God created you to have.

Pastor James Moore put it well, when he wrote: “The happiest people I know are the grateful people; the strongest, most fulfilled people I know are the thankful people. Those who have the attitude of appreciation are the most zestful and radiant people in all the world. Even in the most difficult circumstances of life, they know, because of their strong faith, that God is with them, and that because God is within, they cannot be defeated. They know that, ultimately, God will give them the victory, and for that they are grateful. It is this powerful, positive attitude of appreciation that colors every situation.” (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, p. 10)

The invitation for all of us, as children of God and followers of Jesus, is to be thankful people who bear a powerful, positive attitude of appreciation every day. May we never be so busy, or take what we have so for granted, that we don’t turn around, and return thanks to the God who has given everything, even His Son Jesus, for us.

So I invite you now, just for a few moments, to sit in silence and give thanks to God for the things He has done for you and the blessings He has showered upon you. Then, after a few moments, we’ll sing together a wonderful hymn, “Give Thanks!”