

Gratitude 10/13/2013

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” 14 When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” 19 Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

THE POWER OF THANKSGIVING

Everywhere I go I hear complaining.

People complain about congress and the government shutdown. People complain about the looming financial crisis. People complain about their children. People complain about their parents. People complain about their spouse.

And some manage to complain about all of the above!

In a world filled with naysayers I have a suggestion. Let’s have Thanksgiving early this year! We need it now more than ever.

You see, I would contend that gratitude is the most powerful and the most often overlooked emotion. If we can learn to count God’s blessings instead of our troubles, we are indeed on the road to recovery.

Now don’t misunderstand. I’m not saying that we should take an unrealistic view of the world. We should not ignore injustice and corruption. We should not forget about the horrors of war or close our eyes to the dangers that loom in the immediate future.

But, as a matter of faith, I am suggesting that we change our emphasis. Let’s make giving thanks to God the first order of business ... every day and come what may.

Long ago a minister had 40 to 50 funerals each day. Before it was all over he would bury over 4500 people including his own wife. The minister's name was Martin Rinkart.

Martin had the misfortune of being a pastor during the Thirty Years War. And he served a congregation in a walled city.

The city became terribly overcrowded as people sought refuge from the horrors of war. And as a result of the overcrowding the people in that city suffered from famine and disease.

In 1637 a plague swept through the city, and the misery multiplied.

How did Martin respond to such difficulty? One of the things that he did was write the words to a hymn. We will sing it this morning. The title? "Now Thank We All Our God."

Pastor Martin knew that in a time of terrible trouble, his people needed to sing hymns of praise and thanksgiving. He knew that gratitude was a powerful emotion. And so he asked his people to count their blessings instead of counting their troubles.

We too need to give thanks. We too need to express our gratitude to God.

Last Tuesday I led a Session meeting for a church in our area. A man spoke to the Session about his desire for the church to sing some of the old familiar hymns.

He said that he wanted the church to praise God and give thanks with a sense of joy and hope. He thought that singing hymns that were more familiar might help the congregation do that.

He said all this in very kind and gentle way. We asked the worship committee to consider this, and they were glad to do it.

But, after he left someone said, "You should know that his wife is in the last stages of the dying process."

His wife was dying, and yet he thought he needed to come to the leaders of the church and talk about singing familiar hymns of praise.

This was a man who understood worship.

True worship is about praise. True worship is about giving thanks to God ... in good times and in bad times.

Giving thanks can heal our broken hearts. Giving thanks can cool our anger. Giving thanks can lift our spirits.

MERCY ON THE BORDER

Our lesson for today gives us yet another example of the power of gratitude, of how giving thanks can save us.

Jesus is once again on the border between Samaria and Galilee. He's going where he shouldn't go and healing people that he shouldn't heal. At least that's what the religious people of his day would have said.

On this particular occasion Jesus runs into ten lepers on the edge of town. The lepers have to stay on the edge of town because they are unclean and outcast. They keep their distance, but they also cry out for help. They say, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

And Jesus does it. He has mercy on them.

Jesus tells them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." (In those days the priest were sort of like the health department. The priests had to certify that these lepers were indeed healed.)

The fact that these ten lepers immediately went to see the priests as Jesus instructed shows that they truly had some faith in Jesus. Notice that they weren't healed right away. They were healed while they were on the way.

Now nine of the lepers continued their journey to see the priests. Jesus had told them to do this, and they were just following Jesus' instruction.

ONE CAME BACK

But, one of the lepers did something different. He turned around, went back to Jesus and expressed his gratitude. In fact he fell at the feet of Jesus in worship.

I don't think we should spend too much time criticizing the nine lepers who didn't come back and express their gratitude to Jesus. After all, Jesus did tell them to go and see the priests to certify their healing.

But, the leper who went back shows us a better way. He noticed that he was healed. He turned back toward Jesus. He praised God.

And how did Jesus acknowledge this act of worship?

Well, first Jesus was amazed that only one out of ten lepers came back to give thanks. Jesus asked, "What happened to those other guys?"

But, the thing that really amazed Jesus is that the thankful one wasn't even a Jew. He was a foreigner. He was a Samaritan.

This story teaches us that the salvation of God is always greater than we can imagine. Sometimes the people that we think can't be saved are the very ones God chooses to save.

And sometimes it is the outsider who is first to recognize God's salvation. Sometimes it is the outsider who is first to come and worship.

A SECOND BLESSING

I believe the grateful Samaritan was blessed a second time.

The NRSV translates verse nineteen, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." That word translated "well" is the Greek word "sozo." It means salvation.

I think the translation of the King James Version is better in this case. The KJV says that his faith had made him "whole." Not only was he saved from his disease; he was also made whole spiritually.

Last week the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. This week Jesus gives his disciples an example of true faith.

Surprisingly this example of faith comes in a person who is an outsider. He is a Samaritan. He is a leper who resides on the edge of town. He is an illegal alien who has crossed the border.

And yet he is an example of faith. His faith made him whole.

SALVATION FOR US

Many of us call to Jesus from a distance. We ask for healing. But, when the healing comes sometimes we do not notice. We just keep going.

But, what Jesus really wants us to do is turn around and come near to him. We don't have to stay at a distance any more because we are no longer unclean.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
He has healed our sin-sick souls, and that's why we can dare to come near to Jesus and worship.

We don't have to hide from others, and we don't have to hide from God.

Now we are saved.
Now we are made whole.
Our life is no longer based on fear or anger or shame.
Our life is based upon grace and gratitude.

We might not be a leper or a Samaritan.
But, there are people who would still keep us at arm's length.

Maybe they think of us as a foreigner who doesn't deserve to be here.

Maybe they think of us as a sinner who deserves the bad fortune that comes our way.

Maybe they think of us as a person from the wrong side of the tracks.

We live in a culture filled with blame and accusation.
We live in a world where very few stop to give thanks.
But, God in Christ has come to break that cycle of guilt and shame.

It doesn't make any difference what the world thinks.

It only matters what God as revealed in Jesus Christ thinks. And Jesus tells the lepers, the foreigners and those who have been abandoned by society,

"I'm going to heal you. You don't have to live the way you were living.
You don't have to live in isolation any more.

You can turn around and go in a different direction. You can come near to me.

And when you come near to me I will lift you up and send you into the world a changed woman.

I will lift you up and send you into the world a changed man.

You are God's child.
 You are accepted just as you are.
 You are made whole.
 You are saved."

Now that's a reason to give thanks.

THE EUCHARIST

The word used to describe the gratitude of the Samaritan is the same word we use for the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. The sacrament is all about giving thanks for our salvation in Christ Jesus.

But, sadly the Lord's Supper has often been a source of division. Instead of uniting people, the sacrament has often divided us. We often come to the table with the wrong attitude.

And of course that defeats the whole purpose.

A minister told of spending a week at a monastery with a group of seminary students. At noon every day those in the guesthouse joined the monks for the Eucharist along with a number of people from the local community.

One day a couple of retirement age came to receive the sacrament. And the man wore a sweatshirt that said, "I can only be nice to one person a day, and today is not your day."

The minister wrote, "What was he thinking? And why did his wife let him get out of the house dressed that way knowing that he was going to receive Holy Communion?"

The next day the man was back with a new sweatshirt. This one read, "What don't you understand about the word 'no'?"

The minister was astounded. He wrote,

“How could this man come to receive the sacrament of grace and forgiveness while wearing slogans that declare that we owe nothing to anyone? How could he draw near to Christ while suggesting that he wanted to keep others at a distance?”

Unfortunately, he's not the only one to do that.

We might not wear those slogans on our sweatshirt, but many of us wear those slogans in on our heart. Instead of letting gratitude guide our actions we let self-interest and a sense of entitlement guide our actions even in the church.

When we do that we can't come close to Jesus.
We remain at a distance.

And we are not whole.

COMING CLOSE TO JESUS

Notice that after the Samaritan was healed the first thing he did was come close to Jesus.

Before they were healed the Samaritan and the other nine lepers did not dare to approach Jesus or anyone else for that matter. They kept their distance. Coming close was not an option.

But, when the Samaritan is healed and comes back to Jesus, he comes close to him. He lies down in humility in his presence.

In an instant he has gone from a life of painful isolation to a life of precious intimacy.

This story is about gratitude.
That's the title of my sermon.
It's about saying “thank you” to Jesus.

But, it's about more than that.
It's about daring to draw close to Jesus.

This healing brought the Samaritan close to Jesus.

For him faith was more than just having his healing certified by the priests. His healing opened up a yearning for a deep, personal relationship with God.

His healing brought him to his knees in humility and joy.

That's a picture of faith.
And that's what God wants for us.

Tragically the self-centeredness of our society often rubs off on us, and that keeps us from coming close to Jesus. We are preoccupied with our own needs, our own agenda.

And so we maintain our distance from God and from each other.

It gives us the illusion of self-sufficiency.

But, rest assured that self-sufficiency is indeed an illusion. And if we keep on that delusional path, life will soon show us the error of our ways.

Better that we turn around now and come back to Jesus.

Gratitude is at its heart an expression of our need for others and our need for God.

We cannot live at a distance and truly know what it means to have faith.

All that we have: food, clothing, health ... you name it ... are gifts from God. We are totally dependent upon the grace of God for everything.

When we acknowledge that we turn around, come close to God in Christ, and get down on our knees.

An ancient confession of the church asks,
"What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

The response is "that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death--not to my self, but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ ..." (Heidelberg Catechism 4.001)

That was the Samaritan's confession at the feet of Jesus.

And that is our confession.

Think about the people you know who have great faith.

I bet they are people who are filled with gratitude.

I bet they are grateful for everyone and everything that has touched them in a positive way. For them dependence is not a dirty word but simply a fact of life.

They believe that all they have is a gift from God. And gratitude is a way of life.

God, give us that kind of faith. Give us the faith of the Samaritan.

Help us see the blessing.

Help us turn around and go in a different direction.

Help us come back to Jesus and worship at his feet.

That kind of faith can make us whole.

Amen.