

Healed By Gratitude

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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 BORDER

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.

As required by the law, they keep their distance, but they also cry out for help.

They cry, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Apparently stories about the ministry of Jesus have even traveled to the leper colonies.

Jesus responds to their plea.
He has mercy on them.

But, he heals them in a way that requires the lepers to have faith.

He doesn't heal them right away.
Instead, he tells the lepers,

"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.)

HEALED ON THE WAY

The fact that these ten lepers immediately went to see the priests shows that they truly had some faith in Jesus.

They weren't healed right away.
They were healed while they were on the way.
(By the way, that's often true for us as well.)

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.

But, one of the lepers did something different.

First, he turned around, and praised God in a loud voice.

Then he went looking for Jesus.

When he found Him, he fell at his feet in worship.

And he thanked Jesus ... profusely.

The tense of the verb indicates continuous action.

In other words, he just kept on thanking Jesus.

It was quite a while before Jesus could get a word in edgewise! He was truly grateful.

WHY DID ONE COME BACK?

I don't think we should spend too much time criticizing the nine lepers who didn't come back.

After all, Jesus did tell them to go and see the priests to certify their healing.

Perhaps, they were just doing what Jesus told them to do.

But, I wonder.

Why did one leper went back?

What caused him to respond differently from the others who were healed?

Let's see.

He noticed that he was healed.

He praised God.

He fell at the feet of Jesus in worship.

And, oh yes, there's this matter of his nationality.

He was a Samaritan.

Maybe the answer is found in the last thing we learn about this thankful leper.

He was a Samaritan.

He was a foreigner.

He had a religion that wasn't accepted.

He couldn't go to the priest.
He would be rejected.

In the priest's eyes he would still be unclean even though the leprosy was gone.

He had to come back.

All he had was Jesus.

JESUS' RESPONSE

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 truly worship.

I wonder if we in the church inadvertently limit the grace of God.

God can make the leper whole.
God can welcome the stranger.

But, can we?

Do we understand that the grace of God is for the outsider as well as the insider?

FAITH MADE HIM WHOLE

I believe the grateful Samaritan was blessed a second time because he worshipped at the feet of Jesus.

He understood what so many others missed.
He trusted in the grace that new no boundaries.

The NRSV translates the words of Jesus in verse nineteen this way,
“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

That word translated “well” is the Greek word for salvation.

The KJV says that his faith had made him “whole.”
I like that translation a bit better.

Not only was he saved from his disease; he was also made whole spiritually.

And isn't that what we need as well.
We need to be whole.
We need to be saved.

We need to have more faith.

In the passage that precedes our lesson, the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith.

The disciples realized their shortcomings.
They realized that they needed to be more faithful.
But, what would that faith look like?

This week Jesus gives his disciples an example of what increased faith looks like.

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 was strong enough to make him whole.

I wonder.
What example of faith might Jesus give us?

Could that example of faith even come from the other side of the border,
from one who has been rejected and marginalized by the larger society?

You have to wonder about such things ...
if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear.

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 even stop to notice.

We just keep going.
Or we continue to ask for more from a distance.

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.

He is the great high priest who takes away the sins of the world.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
He has healed our sin-sick souls.

And that's why we, like the Samaritan can dare to come near to Jesus and
worship.

We don't have to hide from others.
And, more importantly, now 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, we still have plenty in our lives that keep us from being all that we could be.

There are still people who want to 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 has come our way.

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

The divisions in our world are suffocating.
We live in a culture filled with blame and accusation.

And 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.

GOD IN CHRIST LIFTS US UP

You see, 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."

THE PASSPORT

Debbie Thomas writing in the Christian Century told of a time when she was only four years old. She was snooping in her father's study and found a folder with four navy blue booklets.

And one of those booklets had a picture of her as a baby.
She was delighted and began to doodle on the pages.

Her father walked into the study and cried,
"What are you doing?"

He snatched the booklet out of her hand and began frantically erasing her drawings.

Debbie realized that her father was not angry.
He was frightened.

He said,

"These are our American passports.
They prove we belong here.

Without them ...
Please don't play with them again."

Debbie said that she learned her lesson.

She didn't play with the passports again.
In fact she says as a daughter of immigrants she still treats her passport like it's something sacred, an icon.

You see, Debbie still has her parent's fear of not belonging, of being cast out.

Debbie is not alone.
There are many in our society who have a fear of not belonging, of being cast out.

I suspect that a good deal of the people here today have a similar fear.

And this fear can dominate our life.

We want so much to belong.
We want so much to be cared for.

We want so much to be accepted.

This struggle for acceptance can be a great burden in our lives.

We always have something to prove.
We always feel that we are not quite worthy of love.

And sadly our strong desire to be accepted can cause us to act in ways that reinforce the rejection that we feel.

HEALED BY GRATITUDE

But, what we learn in our lesson for today is that Jesus can accept and heal anyone.

He can heal people who are on the outskirts, the boundary of life.

He can heal lepers.
He can heal the rejected foreigner.
He can even heal us.

How do we respond to such amazing grace?
How do we respond to such acceptance and healing?

We show our faith through gratitude.
According to Jesus this Samaritan had great faith.
And it was a faith born of gratitude.

This faith that enabled this man to get up and go on his way.

He was no longer known as a leper or a foreigner.
He was now known as a person of great faith, a child of God.

We try all kinds of medications to get well.
We go to all kinds of therapists.

But, I wonder.
Have we tried gratitude?

Actually, there's a website started by a group of medical professionals called "Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude."

It cites philosophical and religious sources that encourage gratitude. And then it cites scientific evidence that grateful people have an edge when it comes to health.

Do you think that something that simple could heal what ails us?

Yes, gratitude is about counting our blessings.
But, it's about more than that.

It's about developing a deep down appreciation for the wonder and the power of the Creator.
It's about falling down and worshipping the One who saves us.

It's about touching the hand of the one who gives us our identity back.

This kind of gratitude does more than heal our bodies.
It heals our soul.
It makes us whole.

I love the way Debbie Thomas put it in her article on this passage. She wrote,

“So when Jesus heals their leprosy he does not merely cure their bodies; he restores their identities.

He enables their return to all that makes us fully human

—family, community, society, intimacy.

In healing their withered skin and numbed limbs, he releases them to feel again

—to embrace and be embraced, to worship in community, to reclaim all the social and spiritual ties their disease stole from them.

Jesus enters a no-man’s-land
—a land of no belonging
—and hands out ten unblemished passports.

He invites ten exiles home.”

Do you want to be healed?
Do you want a passport that reads,
“A citizen of the kingdom of God”?

The road back home begins with gratitude.

The writer, Ann Lamott summarized it well. She said,

My two favorite prayers are ... in the morning,
“Help me. Help me. Help me.”

... and in the evening,
“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Maybe that's why we sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" each week.

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.

That's what we need to do too.
We too need to give thanks.

Gratitude heals.

Amen.