

# “Thankful Praise”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – November 19, 2017*

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Psalm 138

Luke 17:11-19

Two men were walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull. They began running toward the nearest fence, but the storming bull was in hot pursuit, and it soon became apparent that they weren't going to make it.

Terrified, the one man shouted to the other, “John, start praying, we are in for it!”

John answered, “I can't, I've never said a public prayer in my life.”

“But you must,” his companion implored. “The bull is catching up to us!”

“All right,” John panted. “This is the only prayer I know; my father used to say it at the dinner table: *O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.*”

This is Thanksgiving week, meaning that as we gather around tables with family and friends, some of us will be expected to offer public expressions of gratitude: what we are thankful for. But, gratitude, is not just about circumstances, it is also about perspective: we can be thankful not just for what we have, but for that which we choose to see and believe to be blessings.

We encounter Jesus today as he travels on his way to Jerusalem through the border region between Samaria and Galilee – arguably in a place he shouldn't go and, again, healing people with whom he had no business interacting. This time, he runs into a group of ten who are lepers – unclean and outcast. They approach him with a plea for healing, but also keep their distance, trained as they have been by bitter experience to expect little help from those around them. In response, Jesus instructs them to go and show themselves to the local priest; thus promising by implication that they will be made well. And indeed, as they travel they are made well, cleansed of their infirmity. When one of them notices, he turns back to express his gratitude by falling at Jesus' feet and giving thanks.

The story itself is pretty typical of what we find in the gospels: Jesus is traveling, people need healing, Jesus gives instructions, the people are healed and God is praised. The plot gets more interesting when only one notices and turns back to express his gratitude. Then, the punch line comes: “and he was a Samaritan.” (v. 16)

With this identification of the one who returns – that he is a foreigner, one who, based on his country-of-origin and his condition would have been doubly despised – Luke has pulled the rug from any prejudgments concerning either who might receive divine benefits or who best testifies to Jesus’ role in the divine plan of salvation.

The response of the one leper, who we find out is a Samaritan, is celebrated by Jesus as a model of faith and gratitude. His response to being healed is not just about giving thanks, but also giving witness to a process of proper worship: returning to offer thankful praise; poised to be sent out to proclaim good news. This person, overlooked and rejected by the world, is the one who embodies what it means to see yourself as Jesus sees you.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s stay on that point for just a moment. Ten people were healed that day. All ten, no doubt, were surprised at this discovery. Maybe some were overjoyed and ran to share the news with their families; maybe some remained bitter about what they had lost; maybe some even took it for granted. Who knows? What we do know is that one not only felt thankful but decided to actually give voice to those emotions by expressing his gratitude to Jesus. Gratitude is indeed a response to blessings of life, but it is also a choice to recognize the blessing, name it, and express thanksgiving in word and deed.

Gratitude is not the only emotion that we might choose to express in response to the circumstances and events of any given day. Yes, there are reasons for gratitude, but also reasons for fear and frustration, for apprehension, grief or regret.

We may feel a wide range of emotions to all kinds of situations, but we choose which to give expression. When confronted by someone who is angry, do we fight back or retreat as a form of self-protection; or, instead, do we choose empathy, trying to understand to reason behind the anger? When we encounter a set back at work or at school, do we express frustration by casting blame; or, do we resolve instead to keep at it and show gratitude for what we’ve learned through this setback? These are choices we make.<sup>2</sup>

Ten were healed and one only returned to give thanks. It’s worth noting that the other nine did nothing wrong. In fact, they did exactly as they were told and received the blessing that was promised to them. All were healed, but only one was saved; which begs the question: what does it mean for this Samaritan leper to be saved?

By returning, the one received the blessing of healing, as did the other nine. But the one also receives the blessing that comes from *recognizing* blessing, and *choosing* to give thanks. He is saved because Jesus brings him back into community and because he

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, “The Rhythms of Faith”

<sup>2</sup> David Lose, “Second Blessing”

now sees that he can be a member again. No longer is he doubly cursed; instead Jesus has invited him to be a part of the community of faith – where the rejected are accepted, and the ignored are favored.

Just as with the story Luke’s gospel previously told about the Good Samaritan, who went out his way to help a man in need, laying on the side of the road, this story about the ten lepers draws attention to two important themes. First, Jesus cares for those most in need; the broken and the marginalized, here a sick Samaritan. Second, the appropriate response to Jesus is one of recognition and gratitude; for it seems in Luke that those who Jesus cares for are able to see him for who he is, just as Jesus has seen them for who they are.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus says to the Samaritan, “your faith has made you well,” or, as it read in the *King James*, “your faith has made you whole,” or – as Eugene Peterson has translated it in *The Message*, “your faith has healed and saved you.” The Greek word could be translated any of these ways: made well, made whole, healed or saved. In any case, one thing seems clear: there is more at stake here than mere physical healing.

Let’s think again about that moment when we are gathered around the table this week and may be asked to publicly express our gratitude. While our world may be filled with troubles, it is also filled with blessing. Families that care for each other, schools where teachers care about their students and young people are eager to learn, colleagues who work hard and well, relief agencies who tend to the afflicted, service people who regularly put their lives on the line at home and abroad, neighbors who support on another, communities of faith where the gospel is preached and life is nourished. The world is full of blessings as well as challenges. Which will we see and choose to focus on?

Gratitude, like all other options, becomes easier to choose as we practice it. Like faith and hope and love and commitment, gratitude is not an inborn trait that some people have and others don’t; rather, gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time. You don’t want to wait until a charging bull is bearing down on you to offer your initial prayer of thanksgiving. But as you practice gratitude and share it more frequently, it not only grows more natural, it also creates an example for others. By choosing it and doing it regularly, you form a climate in which it is easier to be grateful and encourage others around you to better see those blessings too.

Granted, depending on present circumstances, this may be difficult for some of us; the time may not be right because of uncertainty or loss for us to express gratitude; and if that is the case, then the rest of the family of faith can carry the ball for a while. But, by practicing gratitude, we develop the capacity for greater thanksgiving-oriented muscle

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<sup>3</sup> Meda Stamper from *WorkingPreacher.com*

memory. Over time and with repetition, we grow to see and express gratitude more clearly and profoundly.

Ten were healed, but only one, the Samaritan, came back to give praise and worship to the Lord. Luke is reminding us here that Jesus came to offer healing and salvation to everyone – Jew and Gentile, neighbor and stranger; there is no “other” in God’s Kingdom.

How often it is a stranger or unexpected guest who points out what we have failed to see; who helps us remember why we participate in our ministries; with new ears to hear and eyes to see, who says “thank you.” How often it is a stranger who reminds us of all that we have to be thankful for.<sup>4</sup>

It can be easy to become like the other nine lepers. They do what Jesus says and they are healed. But do we strive to do something more? Are we able to look around and see something miraculous; to recognize that we have been accepted and welcomed into God’s Kingdom and the family of faith? Will we choose to return to God with gratitude, and to freely offer ourselves just as God has so fully given to us?

A reporter once told Mother Theresa, “I wouldn’t do what you do for a million dollars.” She replied, “Me neither.”<sup>5</sup> We live in gratitude to God and within the community of faith because it is what we are made for. Not only does it heal and give life to others, but it saves us, it makes us whole. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> Sue Deppe, “No ‘other’ in God’s Kingdom”

<sup>5</sup> As quoted by Shane Claiborne, *Common Prayer: a Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*