

“One Came Back”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 27, 2023

Thanksgiving / Reign of Christ Sunday

Psalm 65

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Luke 17:11-19

Ten men with leprosy are healed but only one of them – the Samaritan – returns and gives thanks.

Samaritans were the unlovely outsiders of Jesus’ day. At that time, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans was conflicted. Centuries before, they had been one people, but changes and tensions brought on by various conquerors and exiles put them at odds regarding beliefs about intermarriage, worship, and what it meant to be holy.

We have already been introduced to the Samaritans in Luke’s gospel; most notably in the parable of chapter 10 where it is the good Samaritan, and not the respectable religious people, who demonstrates love for his neighbor by showing mercy to a wounded stranger.

In this morning’s reading, the Samaritan is a double outsider. Not only is he considered a foreigner and enemy to Jews like Jesus, but this man had leprosy – a condition that meant you were unclean; separated from family and neighborhood. As Barbara Brown Taylor explains:

Leprosy was not seen, however, as a punishment for sin. It was understood instead as an inexplicable act of God, which made it even more frightening. If there was nothing you did to deserve leprosy then it followed that there was nothing you could do to avoid it, and so lepers were shunned – because their disease was contagious, certainly, but it was more than that. It was their pain, their loneliness, their unspeakable fear no one wanted to catch, and so they were kept at a distance, barred from the religious community, and declared unworthy of God. They were the unclean outsiders, not to be mistaken as having anything in common with the healthy insiders.¹

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Tenth Leper” from *The Preaching Life*.

While keeping their distance, these ten lepers cry out to Jesus for healing. As in nearly all healing stories in the gospels, those being healed are not mere recipients of Jesus' healing power; they are co-participants in their own healing.

In response to their cries for healing, Jesus instructs the ten to go and show themselves to the religious leaders, presumably so that they could be deemed clean of leprosy and allowed to rejoin society. Of the ten who were healed some, perhaps, were overjoyed and ran to tell their family and friends and celebrate. Perhaps a few of them took it for granted. Who knows?

What we do know is that one – the Samaritan – not only felt thankful but decided to actually give voice to those emotions, to express his gratitude to Jesus and to God. Gratitude comes in response to the blessings of life, but it is also a choice to see the blessings, name them, and express thanksgiving in word and deed. And giving voice to gratitude is a choice with consequences, for – as we express thanksgiving – we affect those around us and shape the reality in which we live.²

Gratitude is not the only emotion we might choose to express in response to the events of any given day. There are reasons for thanksgiving, yes, but also reasons for anger, fear, regret, frustration, grief, or apprehension. Each of these emotions colors our experience, has a place and role to play in our lives from time to time. But we choose how much stage time to grant each of these emotions by giving them expression; and, as we do so, we give them power in our lives.

So, when confronted by someone who is angry, do we respond with anger as a form of self-protection or do we instead choose empathy, trying to understand the emotions of the other, and gratitude that the person is willing to be honest? When we face setbacks in some endeavor, do we express frustration or a resolve to keep at it, and thanksgiving for what we've learned through this setback? These are choices we make.

I had a coach in high school who, when asked, "how are you?" would respond not with the standard "fine" or "not bad" but by saying, "better than I deserve." I didn't think much about this at the time, but I realize, now, that by doing so, he was making a choice to express gratitude for the blessings in his life. Working among teens who can be prone to take things for granted, I believe he was choosing to model thanksgiving and help others around him realize how much there is to be thankful for.

² David Lose, "Gratitude and Grace" from *WorkingPreacher.org*

Gratitude – like faith and hope, love and commitment – are not inborn traits that some people have and others don't. Gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time, a habit that forms by repetition. As you practice giving thanks and more frequently express your gratitude, it not only grows, but creates an example for others. More than that, you might create an atmosphere in which it is easier to be grateful and encourage those around you to better see the blessings all around us.

There is no doubt that there is something to be understood here about the people who live on the margins of our communities, who are treated as unlovely or invisible because of how they look or where they come from or what they believe. Jesus clearly notices and loves them and has called us to do the same. To the one leper – the Samaritan – who returned to express his thanks Jesus says, *your faith has made you well*. And we understand, as the original readers of Luke also would have, that Jesus is not only speaking here of physical healing, but that the one has been made whole, he has been saved.

What, then, about the other nine? They, too, were healed of their infirmity and obediently followed Jesus' instructions to go and show themselves to the priests. Reunited with family and friends, reintegrated into their neighborhoods and faith communities, were they not saved and made whole as well?

Given that they did what Jesus instructed them to do, Jesus' question might come across as being disingenuous. In one sense, we know that they are where they are supposed to be, and obediently doing what they were told to do. But what we do not know and remains hidden from us because they do not come back to express their gratitude is what is happening on the inside. What emotion is being featured on stage? Is it anger about what they had endured or regret over time and opportunity lost? Were they still fearful that just like they did not deserve leprosy in the first place, they could not accept this new reality of healing and wholeness?

As he does in the parable of the Good Samaritan earlier in this gospel, Jesus points to an outsider – here a Samaritan leper – to exemplify how his followers are to act. While the Good Samaritan is the subject of neighborly love, the healed leper is the subject of godly love. His actions – turning back to offer praise and give thanks – create the model expression of what it means to love God with all your heart.³

In many of our Thanksgiving celebrations this past week, we used old, dog-eared recipes to prepare foods that have become part of our traditions. Oft times, we remain obedient to these long-held traditions, reveling in the chance for reunion

³ Ira Brent Driggers from *WorkingPreacher.com*

with family and friends and the renewal of beloved relationships. I imagine this was what it might have been like for those nine healed of their leprosy who were welcomed back to their families, homes, and cherished traditions.

But with that one – the Samaritan – Jesus is teaching us something different. Maybe he came back because he had nowhere else to go; the priests were not going to accept him into their community, but he had faith that Jesus would. By choosing to express his thanksgiving, this man shows us what it means to exercise the muscle of gratitude, to place that emotion on center stage, to adopt an attitude of “better than I deserve,” and to create an example of what whole-heartedly loving God looks like.

The other nine missed that opportunity. Hopefully, they will be granted other chances to express thanksgiving – maybe they do, and we just aren’t told. Maybe they, too, can provide witness that God loves all – even the unlovely – and can do all things.

We might believe that loving others is innate; that – like the Good Samaritan – helping those in need, welcoming strangers, healing the sick, feeding the poor; that is part of our DNA; what we are created to be and work to do better. Likewise, while we all have the capacity for gratitude, it is a learned response; a choice that increases in frequency and ease with practice. This is why parents teach their children to always say “thank you,” and why we embrace the traditions of the Thanksgiving holiday, and why we always include an offertory time in our worship. Gratitude can grow and, as it does, it bears witness to God’s love that can heal and save and make us whole.

So, this week, think about how you’ll respond when people casually ask, “How are you?” Maybe you’re not in a place, right now, where gratitude can be the emotion on center stage because of fear or frustration or sadness; but if you are, think about – instead of “good” or “okay” – responding with something like, “I’m grateful.” This could lead to a follow-up question, or it may make the other person think, or it might just help you retain a more thankful frame of mind.

Thanksgiving may have passed, but let’s hold on to gratitude: centering that emotion, exercising that muscle, practicing that habit. Amen.