

October 13, 2013
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

Leprosy and Thank you Notes

I can remember my mom saying it after every birthday and every Christmas. “Sit down, Mary, It’s time to write your thank you notes.” She would arrange a box of stationery and a pen at the dining room table. And I would sit and write a thank you to every person who had given me a present. I wrote a note to every grandparent, every aunt, every 3rd cousin, every friend of the family. For every set of mittens, and every smelly sticker set and every pair of socks and every kitty night shirt. It didn’t matter how big the gift was or how much I did or did not like it. I still had to sit down and write a note and say thank you.

Now I bless my mom for putting me in the habit for writing thank you notes. At the time, I didn’t much care for the activity. It’s not fun for a kid to sit with a box of cards writing thank you over and over again like you are in afterschool detention. But my mom assured me that if I wanted to continue to get presents, then I should express my gratitude.

Someone took the time to think of me and give me that present so I

should take the time to say thank you. Even if it meant that I had to miss part of Night Rider or the Love Boat.

When we say thank you, we don't tend to think of it as something we do for ourselves. It's something we do for others. It's an obligation. It's an ought to and should kind of activity. One we do just to make our mom's happy. But today, Jesus shows us that gratitude isn't just a duty we perform for others. Saying thank you does more for our health and our relationships and our well-being than almost anything else we can do.

Recognizing our blessings, and being grateful for them contributes to our health and our wholeness as a child of God. It's important to have an attitude of gratitude.

In our story from the gospel of Luke today, we meet ten lepers. Lepers as we know, were outcasts in society. Their condition made them unclean. Which is why Jesus encounters them on the border between Galilee and Samaria. That's where they had to live. On the borders. On the margins. Lepers were forced out of their communities. They were forced to leave their families. On the outskirts of towns and villages, they tried to survive. Unable to approach anyone. Only able to

communicate at a distance. They were unwelcomed, unclaimed, and unwanted. A leper's life was life at a distance. It was life on the margins. Socially, emotionally, and spiritually. That was the life of a leper. If you have ever been marginalized, then you might know what it's like to be a leper. If you've ever been forced to leave what you love. If you've ever been separated from your home. If you've ever found yourself in a spiritual no-man's land, then you know. You know what it's like. You know what it's like to be excluded from life. And how much you appreciate what it's like to be included. And how everything you once took for granted, you don't take for granted any more. That first year at college, you realize how much those family suppers at home meant. You miss a holiday at home and you realize how much you miss Gramma Lois' fruitcake and Uncle Louie's wool coat that smells like mothballs. Go camping in the wilderness and suddenly you appreciate clean water and hot food and a comfortable bed. Volunteer to read to kids at the elementary school, you visit Buckhorn Homes for Children you see what some kids have to endure and you are grateful for your parents. Spend a night in the hospital with your child; or sit in the

doctor's office while you receive the diagnosis, and suddenly health is something precious. Go to the funeral of a friend, a parent, a sibling, and suddenly the life you have becomes something you cherish. From the outside, from the margins, from the in-between spaces of life, you find a deep appreciation for things.

Maybe you have been there. Maybe you can remember a time you were on the outside. A time on the margins. When you were without family or friends. When you were exiled from everything you loved. When you felt like you had some sort of contagious disease that made you unclean. And no matter how much you wanted to be part of life you weren't allowed to be. You were too contaminated, too messed up. Too ruined to be included or welcomed or loved.

The first thing that Jesus tells us today is that God doesn't believe that's true about anyone. God believes everyone can be made new. God believes those on the outside should be brought in. Those who are unwanted and disposed of, need to be healed and restored and brought home. So when those lepers cry out to Jesus, "Lord have mercy!", the Lord has mercy. Because that's what the Lord does. The Lord seeks and

saves the lost. He binds up the broken-hearted and lets the oppressed go free. Jesus restores the lepers to health and sends them off to the priests so they can be restored to their families and their communities because that's what the Lord desires for us and for all of creation.

The Lord desires wholeness and healing. But somehow there is a difference between being made clean and being made well. There is a difference between physical healing and spiritual healing. Outward wellness and inward well-being. In our story, Jesus makes all of the lepers clean. But only one is made well. And it all has to do with gratitude.

The ten lepers hear the word of Jesus and when he tells them to go to the priest, they have enough faith to go. They hear the word of Jesus and they have nothing to lose, so they head off with no questions asked. And as they go, as they obey Jesus, they are healed. Their sores are gone.

Their scabs have stopped oozing. Their fingers, their hands, their feet, they aren't tingling any more. They are healed! They are healed! Their leprosy is gone. Their exile is over. They can have their lives back! They can't get to the priest fast enough.

Hurry, they say to one another, hurry, we can make it to the temple by tomorrow morning. Hurry, when we show the priest, he'll have us purified and he'll give us the all clear. Hurry, in just a few days we can be back home. Hurry, they say, I can eat popcorn with my kids. I can mow my lawn. I can go to the store. I can talk with my neighbors over the fence. I can go fishing, enjoy a movie, cook a steak on the grill, play scrabble, watch the fireflies come out at night. I can have my life again. Hurry, hurry. I can have life.

The lepers have been cured of their leprosy. They can get back to life. To the blessed normalness of family and friends. And belonging to a community. All that they once took for granted can be blessedly theirs again. Hurry. Get back as fast as you can. Hurry. Hurry. Get back to life as usual. Hurry. Don't look back, just go. There's no time to waste. But one ex-leper stops. One sees he is healed. He sees his life is his again. And sees a need to say thank you.

It's such a small thing. Such a little thing to stop and say thank you. To stop in the hurry-hurry, that great urgency to get back to life and what you love most, and say thank you. Thank you for my family. Thank you

for my friends. Thank you for the goodness of health and strength and daily food. Thank you for every moment of life that I can enjoy now.

Thank you for what I now know is a gift. Thank you. It's so insignificant and the thank you matters to Jesus. The attitude of gratitude matters.

“Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” This foreigner, he says. The word stings us a little. This foreigner. This Samaritan. The most outside of the outsiders, HE had the sense to say thank you. He felt the need to express his gratitude and praise God. If even a Samaritan could see it, why not the others? “Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine? I mean, I didn't expect a parade with a brass band or anything, but is this it, really? One person. And a Samaritan at that. No offense, but how is it that he's the only one who knows how to say thank you? Were none of the others found to return and give praise to God?”

Were none of the others found to return and give praise to God? Were none of the others, the people of Israel, the natives, the locals, why aren't they here giving thanks? Martin Luther was once asked to define

the true nature of worship and he said the tenth leper came back. The tenth leper saw that he was healed and he came back to say thank you. That's what true worship is. That's what we do on Sunday morning. We pause like the tenth leper to and say thank you. Thank you, God, for this wonderful week. Thank you, God, for being with me through this terrible week. Thank you for the sun and the rain and the turning leaves and every day that I have had to breathe in and out and enjoy life on this earth. Thank you, Lord. We are pausing in the hurry-hurry of life to give thanks and praise to the God who has mercy on us. Jesus says to the tenth leper: "Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well." Your faith has made you well. It's a different word used here for this leper. They others were made clean. But the Greek word applied to this one is *sodzo*. You have been healed, saved, made well, made whole. Gratitude took him from just being cured. To being healed in body and spirit. What would that thankfulness look like in our lives? What would it look like if all we did as the church was done with gratitude?

Diana Butler Bass tells a story in her book, *Christianity after Religion* about a time she was asked to join her church's altar guild. She asked

why she should join the altar guild, and the lady who had asked replied: “Because I’ve been doing this for 35 years, and I’m really tired. It’s time for someone else to do it!” She turned down the offer. But what if the answer had been this:

You know, I’ve been serving on the altar guild for 35 years. Every Sunday I wake before dawn and come down here to the church. It is so quiet. I come into the building and unlock the sacristy. I open the drawers and take out the altar cloths and laces, so beautifully embroidered with all the colors of the seasons. I unfold them, iron them, and drape them on the altar. Then I go to the closet and take out the silver, making sure it is cleaned and polished. I pour water and wine. While I set the table for the Lord’s Supper, I’ve often wondered what it would have been like to set the table for Jesus and his friends. I’ve meditated on what it must have been like to be there with him. I’ve considered what it will be like when we eat with him in heaven. And I’ve learned a thing or two about service and beauty and community ... I’d like to share that with you. Diana Butler Bass writes that if that was the answer she gotten, she would have said, “sign me up.”

The attitude of gratitude means the difference between being made clean and being made whole. It's the difference between just having a life in the world and really living. May we be those who stop and take time to say thank you. May we appreciate, may we take nothing for granted, may we give thanks over and over for the mercy and grace of God.