

Giving Thanks

Deuteronomy 8:12-14, 17-18 ¹² When you eat, get full, build nice houses, and settle down, ¹³ and when your herds and your flocks are growing large, your silver and gold are multiplying, and everything you have is thriving, ¹⁴ don't become arrogant, forgetting the LORD your God: the one who rescued you from Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁷ Don't think to yourself, "My own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me." ¹⁸ Remember the LORD your God! He's the one who gives you the strength to be prosperous in order to establish the covenant he made with your ancestors--and that's how things stand right now.

2 Corinthians 9:8-9 ⁸ God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. ⁹ As it is written, He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever.

Luke 17:12-19 ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, ¹³ they raised their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, show us mercy!" ¹⁴ When Jesus saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." As they left, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" ¹⁸ No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go. Your faith has healed you."

Giving Thanks

So, how was your Thanksgiving? What did you do? Did you watch Macy's annual parade? Did you watch the Westminster dog show? How about a football game? Did you go shopping, taking advantage of the early opening by several major stores? Did you have a big meal with lots of wonderful holiday dishes? When you ask somebody how their Thanksgiving Day was, they usually respond by talking about one or two or three of these activities. It's a little unusual for someone to say, "I took time to really think about all the reasons I have to be thankful."

The scripture from the book of Deuteronomy is especially appropriate for those of us who live in first world countries as opposed to third world countries. While we tend to think a lot about the huge recession, nonetheless, compared to most of the world, we live prosperous lives. And the passage in Deuteronomy warns against the pitfalls of prosperity. It says when you eat and get full, when you have a nice house, when much of your life is thriving, don't become arrogant. Don't forget the Lord your God. Don't think to yourself, "Look at what my ability and my drive have accomplished!" When things go well, it's so easy to think about the effort we've made, the planning that we've done, and how things are working out just as we hoped. We love to think of ourselves as being self-made. But Deuteronomy reminds us that we're made in God's image and blessed with magnificent gifts by our Creator. When blessings come frequently, we tend to think about them less and less. We should be careful that God won't find arrogance and forgetfulness in our hearts. Gratitude will always be in short supply whenever we become more interested in the blessing than in the source of blessing. Who we are is God's gift to us, and what we do with our life becomes our gift to God.

The story in Luke may be a familiar one to you. Ten lepers cry out to Jesus from a distance saying, "Master, show us mercy!" In the Bible, leprosy refers to any number of skin diseases. And the law required that people who had skin diseases separate from the rest of society and live outside the city. They couldn't come close to anybody. They had to dress in a distinct way and call out a warning to anybody passing by.

These people define the term *outcast*. The easiest way to put people out of mind is to place them out of sight. So, lepers suffered as much from a social disease as from a physical one. But, the

law also recognized that sometimes skin conditions were cured. So there was a procedure that would allow you to return to your family and to society. It involved showing yourself to the priest and going through a ritual cleansing. That's why Jesus said, "Show yourselves to the priest." The actual healing is almost a sideline event. Jesus does it without fanfare. When the ten lepers called out for mercy Jesus simply replied, "Go show yourselves to the priests." The text says that as they left they were cleansed. One of the ten, seeing that he was cured, turned around and went back to Jesus. He thanked God for his cure. That's not too unusual. But it was unusual that he didn't keep his distance as the law required until he was declared to be clean. He approached Jesus and fell at his feet. And he thanked him.

Usually we focus on the lack of gratitude expressed by the other nine lepers. Nine of the lepers failed to thank Jesus. Perhaps they thought, "Well that worked didn't it!" Maybe they were telling each other, "I told you that Jesus could cure us!" Perhaps they were thinking, "It's about time my skin cleared up! Now I can get on with my life!" Perhaps they were lost in wonder at what had happened and were dreaming of what a normal life would be like. Perhaps they were congratulating themselves that their plan to get Jesus' attention succeeded. "We did it! Our plan worked!" Being grateful is not a prerequisite for being healed by Jesus; all the lepers found themselves cleansed as they went to show themselves to the priest.

But there's more to the story than that. One man turned back. The man who returned was a Samaritan. In the Jewish culture, Samaritans were outcasts. They were heretics, low class, and despised. So it was surprising that Jesus would heal a Samaritan - a despised person. Notice though, when you became a leper, the social distinctions disappeared. In the world of lepers, your disease was the overriding condition, more important than your previous status in society. With many forms of skin disease, the worst thing was not the disease itself, but the complete ostracism that it caused. So this Samaritan leper had been doubly blessed. Jesus had taken note of him even though he was a Samaritan, and Jesus had healed him.

Sometimes when we study this passage we concentrate on the comment by Jesus, "Were there not ten lepers? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to praise God except this foreigner?" What does it say in Deuteronomy? When things are going well for you, don't forget God. When you're cleansed of leprosy, don't forget God! The nine children of Israel forgot to be grateful to God. The heretical Samaritan remembered.

Sometimes I remind you that the sermon I preach is often the sermon that I need. As I worked on this sermon, I realized that I was being like the nine lepers who were cured and dashed off to enjoy the blessing they had been given. Several weeks ago, you and I received the news that we had been granted a generous amount of money to fund my sabbatical and to sustain the congregation while I'm gone. I was stupefied and dumbfounded. It seemed unreal. I mentally staggered around in disbelief, surprise, and wonder. With joy that was too overwhelming to really comprehend, I offered a prayer of thanksgiving to God. As I began to accept the idea that we had really and truly received this enormous blessing, I began frantically making lists of all the decisions to be made, the questions that needed answers, the equipment to buy, and the things to do. What I forgot to do was turn around and go thank the foundation for their trust and generosity.

Looking down at the grateful Samaritan who lay at his feet, Jesus said, "Get up and go. Your faith has made you well." It's unusual that Jesus said "Your faith has made you well," because all ten of them were cured of their leprosy. Jesus must be referring to something different about this person compared to the other nine. The verb that is translated "made well" is *sozo*, the same word that is often translated "to be saved." We find that there are multiple layers of meaning in this verse. While it's often translated "your faith has made you well," it can also be translated as "your faith has saved you." We find this same word in the story of Zacchaeus and Jesus in Luke 19. Zacchaeus said to Jesus, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation [*sozo*] has come to this house. (Luke 19:8-9 NRS) Today!

What we have in today's passage from Luke is a story of ten being cured - and one being saved. Nine returned to the world that they had left. One began to live as a citizen in God's kingdom. Just like Zacchaeus, that day salvation came to the Samaritan's house. The kingdom of God was within him. "Your faith has made you well" refers, not just to medical healing, but to the holistic healing of this person. The Westminster catechism says that our chief and highest end is to worship God and enjoy him forever. This isn't because of who we are, but because of who God is. And the Samaritan realized this. His focus had been on his own miserable state. Now, his focus wasn't on his newly restored health, but on the love and power that had brought about the change.

It's pretty easy for those of us who have been on the church rolls for a long time to become a bit complacent. The blessings we enjoy can begin to be a bit like wallpaper. And we settle into a comfortable routine with the friends we've made here over the years. It's a little startling when some stranger, some Samaritan, wanders into the church and begins to enthusiastically take part in things. They delight in the friendliness that's become as comfortable as an old shoe to us. They get wide-eyed at the good news of the gospel that we've let slide into old news. When I was a child, I went to church with my Methodist grandparents. I was used to gospel songs that told me of my guilt, songs about life as burden and pain, and future relief that I would have to die to receive. There in Grandma's church, we stood and sang "Holy, holy, holy" and I was blown away by the experience of joyful worship as we sang of a God of powerful love and care. It was old news to those Methodists all around me and I fear that it may not have been as fresh and sharp as it was to me. Lord, help us to be like little children and strangers, always filled with awe and wonder and joy for being your children!

What is your leprosy? What puts a boundary between you and others? What makes you feel inadequate? What makes you feel dirty? What separates you from others? Where does your misery lie? Jesus urges us to be whole. Come into the kingdom where all are valued, all are loved. We have such a hard time even imagining that we are loved. We think we have to earn it. We don't! We just have to accept it. And when you really accept it, a tremendous load is lifted off. Your heart is free to dance and your soul is free to love. When you realize that you can live in God's kingdom now, a lot of the pressure to conform to the values, the demands of the culture, and all of the peer pressure just fade into inconsequential dust.

We act like faith is only about believing the right things and leading a moral life. Faith isn't believing that Jesus lived; it's spending our life walking the path that he walked. It isn't simply a matter of not stealing; it's replacing selfishness and greed with generosity. Faith isn't limited to not coveting; it blossoms into gratitude for the blessings we have. To have faith is to live it - and to live it is to give thanks. Living a life of gratitude constitutes living a life of faith. There's something life-giving about gratitude - and faith without gratitude isn't faith at all. Karl Barth often said that the basic human response to God is gratitude, not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. "What else can we say to what God gives us, but stammer praise?" Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Amen!

Sisters and Brothers,
We are not self-made; we are God-made
Live with wide-eyed wonder at the blessings you've received.
Let gratitude carry you into a kingdom life of wholeness!