

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost 18, Proper 23, Lectionary 28

Texts: Luke 17:11–19, 2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c

Preached: October 13, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the giver of every good gift, and from Jesus Christ, who is our healing.
AMEN

Do you remember when you learned to say “thank you”? I don’t. I know that it must have come early. I can hear in my mind to this day the echo of my mother’s voice: “Say ‘thank you’!” or that question that was really a command, “What do you say?” Your mother, too? I don’t know how early she started saying that to me, but knowing my mother, it was probably as soon as I begin reaching out my hand to take things that were offered to me. I was the fourth child, so I’m guessing that by that point, she had said it thousands of times. It must have been a slow lesson for me to learn, because she was still saying it to me when I was a teenager. And I have heard her saying it to me even in past days in my mind’s ear as I look at the stack of thank-you notes on the kitchen table, still unwritten in these months following her funeral. Showing gratitude mattered to her, and she would be horrified that I haven’t yet sent notes to thank people for their kindness.

I think most of us had parents who tried to teach us to be mindful of thankfulness, who sought to instill in us that need to stop and acknowledge with gratitude the giver of a gift. It’s a good thing to do, and can set a pattern for life. Expressing gratitude is good both for the giver and for the recipient of the gift. But some of us are sloppier about it than others. I’ve been trying lately to cultivate a habit of more explicit gratitude, and when it happens, it’s terrific. I can feel the benefits spiritually and relationally. It does me good, and it does the giver good. It binds us together more closely. But it’s easy to get sloppy with it, isn’t it? It’s easy to take gifts for granted. And there’s another pitfall: We can easily fall into an understanding that we say ‘thank you’ simply to ensure that the giver will be inclined to give to us again in the future—‘Thank you’ as transaction, or as buttering up. I once heard a grandmother say to her small grandchildren, “If you don’t say ‘thank you’ to me, Grandma isn’t going to give you presents anymore.” “Thank you” should always be a heartfelt response to a gift, and not a means of obtaining it, or the very idea of “gift” is undermined.

Today’s gospel lesson is sometimes read along those same lines. Some folks see in it a simple lesson in good manners, kind of like Jesus as the mother teaching us to say ‘thank you.’ If we read the story that way, then we come away with a message that God demands to be thanked for doing nice things for us. If we don’t thank God, the reasoning goes, then we’re ungrateful children, and God won’t do anything nice for us anymore. And so we can begin to think that getting God to do nice things for us is a simple matter of saying thank you to God, saying things to butter God up ...and if we butter God up enough, then God will owe us BIG time and will HAVE to do what we ask...we can all be pretty manipulative when it comes to God. Many of us have this notion of God as this big parent in the sky who likes to be fawned over, who wants to hear just the right words or we won’t get anything, and who demands praise to satisfy an enormous ego.

But I want you to notice something very important in this story: All *ten* of the lepers are cured of their ailment, not just the one who says thank you to Jesus. Jesus tells all ten of them to do what the law commanded for someone who has been healed of leprosy. And all ten of them, even the ungrateful ones, are healed. Their healing is not dependent upon them saying ‘thank you’...because, you see, all ten ask for mercy and healing, and all ten receive it, equally. All ten do exactly as Jesus commands them to do. (In fact, if you look at it very closely, the leper who turned back was the one who *didn’t* do as Jesus commanded him! But we can talk about that another day.) And presumably, Jesus did not rescind his healing of the other nine when in disappointment he sees that none have come back except the one.

So clearly, God’s blessing on these folks is not dependent on them saying or doing the right thing. There is no transaction required. God heals and blesses anyway, because that is simply who God is. God loves to set people free. God love to give. So what *is* Jesus trying to teach us here? Is he just like my mother, saying, “Now what do you say....?” I don’t think so. Let’s look closely at what this one leper does. First, he stops to notice what God has done for him. And when he realizes what God has done for him, he stops dead in his tracks and turns back around and looks at Jesus, the source of his healing, and starts to run to him. And then he begins praising and thanking God with a loud voice. He starts talking loudly, telling God’s goodness to other people. He’s not just telling *God* how good God is, he’s telling *everybody*. And then he heads back to Jesus,

and he throws himself down on the ground, saying “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” His gratitude is a *result* of recognizing what God has done, not the *cause*. We praise God not to *persuade* God to be gracious, we praise God because God *is* gracious, and we have come to recognize that. We praise God because we are in relationship with God, and are thankful for God’s presence and faithfulness to us.

The same lesson is shown in the story of General Naaman, who in spite of being the leader of the armies from Syria that have subjugated Israel as a vassal state, comes to God’s prophet Elisha in Israel for healing. In spite of not even knowing or believing in Israel’s God, and in spite of being scornfully reluctant to do what the prophet tells him to do, he gets his healing. Now, in the next part of the story that doesn’t appear in today’s reading, Naaman, in his gratitude to God, tries to shower Elisha with extravagant thank-you gifts—but Elisha refuses. This is not a transaction. God has healed Naaman as a generous gift. When Naaman’s gifts are refused, he ends up asking instead for two cartloads of dirt from Israel, so he can take them home and spread them out and kneel down to thank Israel’s God for his healing. A relationship of gratitude has formed.

Back to the leper who has been healed, here’s something else that happens to this man when he turns in genuine gratitude to God. Jesus says to him, “Your faith has made you well.” First, what does that word “faith” mean? Faith for Jesus is not some set of intellectual beliefs about who God is. It is not agreeing to a set of statements somebody has told you you must believe about God. Faith is not performing the right religious rituals. Faith is stopping and noticing how good God is, turning around and paying attention to the amazing things God has done for you, acknowledging God as the source, and then with deep gratitude telling others what you have experienced, what you have received. Too often we are like the other nine lepers, rushing on our way without stopping to realize just how good God has been to us. We get our gifts, but like kids on Christmas morning, we don’t always stop to acknowledge the relationship with the one who has given them to us. Faith is that relationship of gratitude to the giver.

And when Jesus says, “Your faith has made you *well*,” that’s not really the best translation of the Greek word. We hear “well,” and think only of the man’s physical healing. But that can’t be what it’s referring to, because all ten of the lepers were cured, not just this man. The word in Greek, while it can refer to physical healing, carries a much deeper meaning of “wholeness.” So Jesus is saying to the man, “Your realization of God’s goodness has made you whole.” Wholeness is something independent of healing. It completes our healing. True wholeness comes to us when we turn back around and give God thanks and praise for God’s goodness. It is part of God’s gift to us. The gratitude is where we find a second blessing.

From beginning to end in our worship liturgy, we give thanks. The purpose of our gathering for worship is to cause us to stop and recognize what God has done, and to say ‘thank you,’ not because it butters God up, but because it does us good to say it, and it builds our relationship with God. In thankful response to God’s giving, to God’s healing, we come to the Eucharist. ‘Eucharist’ is not just a fancy noun to name Holy Communion. It actually is a verb, the same verb used to describe the healed leper action as he casts himself down at Jesus’ feet. It means, ‘to thank.’ When we come to the table, we are like the leper who realizes the astonishing gift he has been given, and comes back praising God, thanking Jesus for the awesome thing that he has done. We come to this table saying, “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” I begin the Eucharistic prayer with the Great Thanksgiving, with a recounting of God’s mighty acts in history, God’s amazing gifts to us, and the thanks just keep piling up, overflowing. But our grateful prayers to God are a *response* to what God has done, and not the cause of it.

Our praise and gratitude doesn’t have to be nearly as fancy as these prayers, though. I love the writer Anne Lamotte. She says that she has two favorite prayers: In the morning she prays, “Help me, help me, help me!” And in the evening, she stops and looks back at the day, and says, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

So as we go through the rest of this time of worship, let’s open our hearts in gratitude and deep love for all that God has done for us and for all of creation. And when we say those words of thanks, let’s say them as fervently as that leper at the feet of Jesus. Practice with me, dear children of God. Now, what do you say? “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” AMEN