

“And He Was a Samaritan”
Rev. David Gregory
October 9, 2022
18th Sunday after Pentecost



The Healing of the Ten Lepers
James Tissot

Readings

Luke 17:11-19

from the New Revised Standard Version

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’s feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

David Whyte

in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

Thankfulness finds its full measure in generosity of presence, both through participation and witness. We sit at the table as part of every other person’s world while making our own world without will or effort, this is what is extraordinary and gifted, this is the essence of gratefulness, seeing to the heart of privilege. Thanksgiving happens when our sense of presence meets all other presences. Being unappreciative might mean we are simply not paying attention.

One of the things we have emphasized in this community during our years together is the practice of gratitude. It starts with a feeling, but it doesn’t end there. It always moves us into the realm of practice. Doing something. Saying something. Changing the energy from “please” to “thank you.” Certainly, it is nice for the other person to be appreciated and thanked for something he or she has said or done or given. You can tell by the look on someone’s face if s/he feels appreciated. There is a sense of validation, a reinforcement of purpose, an expression of love. But we seldom spend time on what thanking does to the thanker, how it shifts one from the myth of individualism to the real world of community and interdependence.

There is a sense in which an appreciative nod or a simple thank you is what makes you human. It is the entry point to the human race, the antidote to isolation, the lessening of egocentrism, the signal of openness to human relationships and loving interactions. Giving and receiving are like inhaling and exhaling. Prayers of supplication and prayers of thanksgiving are both necessary and inextricable from each other. To barge in with a laundry list of prayer requests without a conscious awareness of our gifts and blessings is like inhaling and never exhaling—which of course sounds ridiculous. The energy shift created by gratitude or appreciation gets us to a far more powerful place than does asking. It's not that it's more important than asking. Jesus said, "You don't *have* because you don't *ask*." But asking and receiving without appreciating and thanking is an energetic dead-end. It's like a sketch that is never completed, a statue that is left half done. There is beauty there, but most of it is missing.

Both gratitude and supplication come to bear on this week's gospel reading in which Jesus was confronted by ten men who suffered from a skin disease. Their condition made them outcasts, "unclean," shoved to the margins of their society. They asked Jesus to have mercy and heal them. It seems the word had spread that there was something unusual going on with this young roving rabbi. People were flocking to see and hear him, and in the oppressive culture of first century Palestine, everyone needed something. If you found someone to help you, the word quickly spread. If you're hungry and you find food, the feeling of relief is contagious. Others see and respond. For the ten men in the story, their hunger was for healing. It was commonly thought at the time that a skin disease, like any other disease, meant that God was unhappy with you. As in the "health and wealth gospel," if you are physically or monetarily blessed, it is because God is rewarding you. If you are sick or poor, it's because you've done something wrong. Jesus uprooted this idea when he proclaimed liberty to the captives and brought good news to the poor. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he said, "for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth."

So here were the ten men. "Have mercy on us," they said. "Help us now!" The only thing Jesus said in return was, "Go show yourselves to the priests." The priests were the ones to verify that the men were indeed healed, allowing them to rejoin their families and their society. It doesn't actually say that Jesus healed them on the spot; it seems that the healing took place "as they went." He told them to step forward toward the priests, and as they did so, they began to recognize their healing. Imagine their joy as they looked at one another and began leaping and running, in a sense leaving Jesus in the dust in the midst of their understandable euphoria.

Of course, the point of the story is that one man among the ten turned around and showed his appreciation, literally face-down on the ground at Jesus's feet. It is then that Luke gives us the deeper layer of this story when he says, "*And he was a Samaritan.*" The Samaritans, of course were ethnically and religiously "other." Not purely Jewish and not purely gentile, they were the uber-marginalized of that time and place. No longer doubly marginalized by his disease *and* his ethnicity, the Samaritan now is simply back to being the "other." There was no point in going to the priest. The priest would not have seen his healing, only his "otherness." In other words, Jesus saw him in his wholeness. There is a sense in which visiting the priest would have been a step backward. Jesus instead wants this man to move forward. "Go on your way, because your faith has made you well." This is a radical statement. Ascribing "faith" to a Samaritan implies a human dignity that transcends religion or ethnicity. And so we see that gratitude in this case isn't a Christian practice or a Jewish

practice. Gratitude is a human practice. The healing energy Jesus offered to the world was not restricted to a particular religious persuasion or ethnicity. Healing is not a Christian practice or a Jewish practice, it is a human practice. And of course in some sense, the "please" and "thank you" in this story was simpler and more direct for this man, for he was unencumbered by the baggage of religious elitism. He asked and received and said thank you and went on his way. In other words, he got on with life.

David Whyte says that "thanksgiving happens when our sense of presence meets all other presences. Being unappreciative might mean we are simply not paying attention." This man was paying attention. His presence met the presence of Jesus in a way that Jesus's fellow Jews could not. The other nine were not bad people, they were just doing as they were told. But they weren't *present*. They did not come to meet him. They didn't sit at the table of others' worlds in the way that this Samaritan did.

What I would draw from this story today is that I am not well-served by my religious baggage. In fact, the form of my religion often gets in the way of its function, which is to bring healing and light to myself and to the world around me. It's easy, though, to get caught in the detours or caught in the weeds when the shortest distance between two points—or a path of least resistance—is available for us to take at any time. The Christianity that is emerging among us is one that takes that shorter simpler path, gets right to the point, and directs us to our primary function in the human race, which is to love and care for others as we would care for ourselves. This is the kind of faith that makes us well. So let's get on with it.