

VESPERS SERMON Luke 17:11-19 Where are the Other Nine?

Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday, is coming soon! I love the colors, the foods, the gathering of family and friends, the sharing of thanks after dinner, and sitting around talking and playing board games. But Thanksgiving will be different this year during the Covid-19 pandemic. Rob and I made the hard decision to not gather with people in our home on Thanksgiving. And since we already bought two large turkey breasts to grill, we'll still grill them and on Wednesday we'll deliver big portions with side dishes to everyone who would have been at our table, staying outside and masked. We'll keep our tradition of sharing 3 blessings from this year on ZOOM on Thanksgiving Day. Thanksgiving will be different this year for sure. The question is, will we let the virus keep us from giving thanks in this unsettled time?

In today's scripture reading, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and he ended up traveling on the border between Galilee and Samaria. There was no distinct border between these two regions; it was all just open land that went for miles with a few small villages scattered here and there. But the people of Galilee and the Samaria did not get along; in fact, they normally had nothing to do with one another. They didn't talk to each other, they certainly would never share a meal, they saw each other as religious enemies. Their hostility was the result of something that had happened hundreds of years before. But the hatred remained.

As Jesus and his disciples were nearing a small village, 10 men with leprosy called out for help. People with leprosy, or any skin disorder that might be leprosy, were required to stay outside the villages and towns, to keep their distance, because leprosy was contagious. Leprosy causes ugly sores and destroys the nerves in the arms and legs causing weakness and the loss of the ability to feel pain. Not feeling pain might sound good to us, but not feeling pain meant they could injure themselves without knowing it so they didn't take care of the injury and tended to lose their toes and fingers, feet and

hands. Because leprosy was contagious, when they came near other people, they had to call out, “Unclean, unclean,” to warn people. It was rather like us today wearing masks and keeping our distance so others are protected in case we have Covid and don’t know it. But wearing masks today doesn’t have the emotional stigma calling yourself unclean had. Unclean meant they were less than the clean people, they could not worship with clean people, or live with their clean families. Unclean meant being treated as unworthy, sinful, looked down on. So people with leprosy lived together in small, very poor groups outside the village. No jobs except begging, no one to touch and be touched by, and always seen as unclean, unworthy, unwanted. It was a devastating, lonely life.

So these men cried out, “Master, have pity on us!” “Do something, Jesus, we’re miserable.” Perhaps they were begging for food or clothing, or for a few coins to get food somewhere. Perhaps they had heard about Jesus’ healing powers and were hoping for a miraculous touch. But Jesus did none of those things. He just sent them on their way to show themselves to the priests. Sending them to the priests might sound like a cold thing to do, but the Jewish law allowed only the priest to examine a person and declare them healed of leprosy and able to return to normal society. So off the ten men went to see the priest. Did they grumble along the way- “That’s all the attention we get from Jesus? What are we going to say to the priest? He’s going to think we’re stupid for bothering him.” But on the way to the priest, they realized they had been healed. How did they know? Did they regrow fingers or hands, did they suddenly have pain when they walked, did they notice the sores were gone from each other’s faces? Whatever happened, they knew they had been healed while they did what Jesus said. Imagine their joy. Talk about a Thanksgiving blessing to share! They would return to their families and friends again, hug their wives and kids again, regain their dignity and respect, worship, and stop calling out those ugly words, “Unclean, unclean!” Jesus had given them their lives back. I imagine them starting to run to the priest.

This story would have reminded the early hearers of an Old Testament story. Naaman was a Syrian general of the army, a Gentile, who unfortunately had leprosy. He was a man who used to have power, wealth, and status, but had lost it to leprosy. He couldn't lead his army into battle if his soldiers were afraid to be near him. But his wife had a young Jewish girl as a servant who told Naaman about a prophet in Israel who could cure his leprosy. So Naaman traveled to see the prophet Elisha, who, like Jesus, did not touch him, or express pity, or say a magic spell over his leprosy. The prophet did what Jesus would do- he gave Naaman instructions of what to do- to go dip himself in the Jordan River 7 times. Naaman balked saying if he wanted to take a dip in a river, there were better rivers back where he lived. But finally he did and on the 7th dip, his leprosy was gone. He was healed as he obeyed Elisha's instructions, and he came back to Elisha and praised God.

In Luke's story, one man came back to Jesus after being healed too. Why didn't he go to his priest like the others? Jesus had healed him, he would soon no longer be an outcast, he had every reason to go to be released by the priest and go home and celebrate with his family. It wouldn't have been wrong to do. Jesus had told them to go. But this one man came back first, knelt down in front of Jesus, and shouted his thanks. He couldn't hold it back, he couldn't take it for granted, he had to shout his thanks to Jesus. His life wasn't back to normal yet, he still had to go see the priest, he didn't know if his family wanted him back, who would give him a job, but this man did not wait for everything in his life to be right to give thanks.

Only now do we find out that he was one of those hated Samaritans. Would Jesus regret healing a Samaritan? He was from the wrong race, he had the wrong religion, he probably spoke a different dialect, he wasn't welcome anywhere, he was a true outcast. But Jesus saw beyond those differences and welcomed the stranger no one else wanted and said not only was his body healed like the others; this man was saved or made whole- inside and out.

Ten men were blessed that day, ten men were glad they had been healed, but only one man was not just glad, he was thankful. There's a difference between being glad and being thankful. We're all glad when good things happen. We're glad when we find a life partner to share life with, we're glad when our kids get good grades or succeed, we're glad when a meal is particularly delicious, or a piece of music is particularly beautiful, we're glad when we feel better after being sick or having surgery, we're glad when we wake up feeling rested. We're all glad when life goes well. But being thankful means we look beyond enjoying the pleasure to thanking the one responsible. It is so easy to take our blessings for granted as though we deserve them, rather than remembering that our blessings are all gifts from God. Sometimes, we find it hard to give thanks because we're focused on what isn't right, what isn't the way we want it, maybe we wish life would go back to the way it used to be. That the church would go back to the way it used to be instead of keep changing. Especially in a time like a Covid-19 pandemic. If only... THEN we could be REALLY thankful. Times like this test our faith and our thankfulness to see if they're real... or superficial. Today's scripture gives us a model in the Samaritan man who chose to come back and give thanks, to shout his thanks, even though his life was still unsettled and still unsure.

Will we join him this Thanksgiving and choose to not only **see** God's blessings and gifts, but to **give thanks**- to God and to people who bless our lives. In a phone call, a card, email, or letter, or a song, written on a pumpkin, or in person with cookies and a mask on. At the grocery store, to your family and neighbors, the doctor's office, to people in this church to a missionary. Be outlandish- send a thank you to the hospital or the police station. Your choice. But let's do choose, in our own unsettled and unsure time, to give genuine thanks in all things, even in the middle of a pandemic.