

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Gratitude Sunday

October 20, 2019

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Luke 17:11-19

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Renewed in Gratitude

You shall set [your offering] down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate.

Deuteronomy 26:10-11



Then one of the lepers, when he saw he was healed turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He knelt down at Jesus' feet and thanked Him. He was a Samaritan – Luke 17: 15-16

One of the first sermons I ever preached was on this very text from Luke. It was Thanksgiving Day, my first Thanksgiving as a new bride and freshly minted pastor. I was nearly late to the service because the turkey wouldn't conform to my expectations. When I got up to read this text, I was so nervous and frazzled that instead of reading *ten lepers approached him*, I read, "ten leopards approached Jesus." After I said "leopards" once my mouth kind of adjusted to the feel of that word, and it just kept coming out "leopard." It was awful, and hilarious.

Have you ever wondered why Luke told this story? It's not in any of the other gospels. Jesus healed hundreds of people, maybe thousands. Why did Luke pick this story to record? Ten nameless people, and one man who *saw that he was healed and turned back praising God with a loud voice, he fell on the ground at Jesus' feet and thanked him*. I want to know about that guy. What made him different – why was he more honest and faithful and authentic than the rest? That's what I want to know.

One likely reason Luke told this story is that the man who turned back was a leper. First Century Jews used that term for a broad spectrum of diseases that were so contagious, mysterious and terrifying that they kept sufferers locked away -- removed from public sight, isolated from their families, synagogues, and their communities. This guy couldn't work. He couldn't sleep in his own bed or see his wife and children. Hebrew law required that (now I'm quoting from Leviticus):

The person who has a leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone. ⁱ

Luke seems to want to cry out with a loud voice that Jesus is Lord! He is Master over even the dread diseases and unexplained powers that threaten us. Christ is Lord! Amen?

There's another reason that this story should be told. The one man who turned back was a Samaritan. The distain Jews had for Samaritans was well known. When Jesus told the parable about the Good Samaritan everyone laughed, because they couldn't imagine such a thing as a good Samaritan. As far as they were concerned Samaritans were pagans, half-breeds, completely unworthy of this kind of mercy.

Luke says that Jesus saw him. Jesus looked at this man and the others who were utter outcasts, people with diseased bodies that made everyone else turn away. I've heard something like this from people who have experienced homelessness; they say people won't look at them. It's like they're invisible. The hardest part of being homeless, they tell me, is that people act like they aren't even there.

But Jesus looked. He saw ten desperate people, and rather than turning away he spoke to them saying:

Go, and show yourselves to the priests.

This was required by Jewish Law, and Jesus was no iconoclast. A priest had to declare sufferers well enough to reenter society -- well enough to go back with their families, well enough to resume their work and be around others. Jesus told them to "Go! See the priest." And they obeyed him; they went, hobbling away on locked up knees and diseased feet.

And on the way they began to notice that the scales were falling off their skin; their eyes were becoming clearer, and their legs were more limber.

Then suddenly one of them, an unsophisticated, uneducated, totally underrated Samaritan turned back. He was on his way to freedom when he turned around, went back to Jesus and threw himself at Jesus' feet, praising God with a loud voice.

Obviously he was not Presbyterian! We don't really do that, but maybe we should. There are some times when reserved is just NOT the thing to be. Sometimes you need to pour yourself into worship and praise. Yes? This is worship – realizing all that God has done. The only right thing to do is to embrace Jesus, and bow down at his feet.

I think that's the main reason Luke told this story, it's about gratitude. One man was truly, joyfully grateful. And the others? Jesus asks, *Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine?*

The late, great Fred Craddock called gratitude "the central virtue of the Christian life." He wrote: "I've never known, a person who was grateful who was, at the same time, mean or small or bitter or greedy or selfish, or took pleasure in anybody else's pain. Never."ⁱⁱ

Gratitude leaves no room for anger or regret. Gratitude pushes out sadness, narrow jealousies, and fear. Gratitude makes us generous. Gratitude not only makes a good holiday, it makes every day sacred. The 10th leper seems to have known that. But what about the other nine...and all the rest of us who are still afflicted – with sadness, guilt or disappointment?

Back in 2008, Hailey Bartholomew was married with two healthy children. She knew she had a good life, she knew that, but she was depressed. She couldn't figure out what was wrong, and it kept getting worse. She did a good thing; she found a spiritual director, a nun, who suggested that she spend 10 days focusing on gratitude.

Hailey did that, and realized she needed much more than 10 days. So she came up with her own gratitude practice – she resolved to take at least one picture of something every day that made her feel grateful – autumn colors, a hot shower, friends, coffee ...

And that helped, but not enough. Her depression hung on her like a wet blanket. Then one night Hailey took a picture of her husband serving dinner. She had told herself that he was the least romantic person ever. That evening, when she took the picture, she saw that her husband, Andrew wasn't just giving her a piece of pie...he was giving her the best piece of pie.

She realized that was what he always did— when they drove somewhere, he would gently take her hand, or when it was their children's bedtime, he would sing them to sleep. He was always thinking of others. She just hadn't seen him before.

After that Hailey's gratitude project took off. She started to feel better, and was able to create a website called 365grateful.com. It's had an impact over the whole world. I recommend you visit the site and read the stories. One woman, who experienced the death of a child, wrote to Hailey to say that the daily practice of gratitude is what got her through her grief. ⁱⁱⁱ

Gratitude is a spiritual practice. Gratitude is why we are here, why we gather here every Sunday and sing loud praise to God – yeah, that's what I said, loud praise! You -- who think you can't carry a tune, God doesn't care about the notes. God cares about your heart. We come together every week for one purpose only -- to fall down at the feet of Jesus and offer our lives to him— like this guy did -- because he has given us everything!

You and I may never be instantly cured of a dread disease; or we may be, but we are all, every one of us, given the cure on Calvary. God did that, God gave us everything!

The moment we realize it, we become like the tenth leper, and like Hailey – we are healed, and we are free!

Last week Jacob taught us about vision, how Moses stood on Mount Nebo and looked over into the Promised Land and saw a future for God's people. God has a great future for Woods Church too!

Moses – God bless him, not only saw the land, he also envisioned a practice of gratitude. He knew that practicing gratitude would make Israel strong. As I close today I want to read to you

Moses' instructions (you thought I forgot about Deuteronomy, but I didn't). Notice that in the middle of this passage there's a creed, a faith statement that has formed the Hebrew people for thousands of years. This is Deuteronomy 26: 1-11. Moses said:

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God:

"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and opulous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me."

You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I want to thank Dave and Bob and the rest of the Renew Team. They have used this scripture passage as a kind of template for us. Today – during the last hymn, we are going to bring the first fruits of our gratitude, the thanksgiving of our hearts, and place them on the Lord's Table. God has given us incredible blessings in Woods Church – hope, prosperity, a future. Today we want to literally cover Jesus' table with our thanks, so feel free to use as many cards as you want. We have a thousand of them.

The table is on the floor so that everyone can have access to it, but if you would prefer to have someone place your cards for you, just hold them up during the last hymn, and someone will take them up for you.

But before we do that let's follow the ancient Hebrews. Let's rise – in body or in spirit – and say what we believe. Let's declare with a loud voice what God has done for us in Jesus, using the words of the Apostles' Creed.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

ⁱ Leviticus 13:45-46

ⁱⁱ Fred Craddock "Does Money Carry Germs?" *The Collected Sermon of Fred B. Craddock*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 257

ⁱⁱⁱ You can read Hailey's and other stories of gratitude at 365grateful.com