

And Only One Came Back

TEXT:
Psalm 66:5-9, 13-20
Luke 17:11-19

October 14, 2007

The other nine, where are they?"

That question by Jesus stands out in this story about the ten lepers who were healed. It strikes me that, if Jesus were suddenly dropped into our contemporary American culture, his question would not be out of place. "The other nine, where are they?" (Luke 17:17)

How thankful are we for all the good gifts we have received from God? What does it mean to be thankful? How do we say thanks? The Psalm this morning is a wonderful reminder of God's activity in the life of the people of God, and our call to give thanks to God for all God's good gifts.

Come and see what God has done:

The Lord is awesome in God's deeds among the mortals

Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of God's praises be heard

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what the Lord has done for me

Blessed be God, because the Lord has not rejected my prayer or removed God's steadfast love from me. (Psalm 66:5, 8, 16, 20)

But you and I live in a time and a culture where we have great difficulty offering the simplest word of thanksgiving to others, and to God. Our age is one where a me-first individualism is the dominant value. What is

important in life is what happens to me, the universe around me is interpreted by what it does for me or to me. In such a me-centric circle, saying "thank you" for an unexpected grace seems out of character. Words escape us.

And so Jesus asked, "The other nine, where are they?"

But our story this morning is about the one who come back to say "thank you."

As he approached a village on his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus heard a group of lepers cry out to him. Like the homeless or people with AIDS in our world, lepers were the untouchables of the ancient world. According to the Jewish Law, they were required to live apart for others, kept away from family, friends and all other people until they were cured or died. Whenever someone would come nearby a leper had to cry out a warning.¹

As so when a group of travelers, including Jesus, came to the outskirts of the village, this small group of lepers cried out, "unclean, unclean." But something unexpected happened in this story. Jesus didn't follow convention; he didn't look away, but instead he drew closer.

The story is very matter-of-fact. Nothing dramatic takes place on this dirt road outside the village. Notice that the lepers did not ask to be healed. They asked for mercy. And yet, for these ten

lepers, Jesus gave them so much more. For each of them, they experienced the most significant moment in their life.

It happened simply and quietly. "When [Jesus] saw them," he told them to go show themselves to the priests. There are no dramatic words, no healing touch. All Jesus did was look at them, looked deeply at them, and that was enough. From that moment on, they were never the same.

Jesus then sent them to see a priest. This is a small but important detail. What does that mean? Only a priest could pronounce a leper healed. So in order to fulfill the Law of Moses, Jesus sends them to the priest in the village.

The ten go, but as they traveled one of them becomes aware of the changes in his skin. He sees the ugly rash disappearing; he feels his hands and his face regaining their wholeness. Without pausing for another moment, he turns around and runs back to Jesus.

Some have suggested that this story could be titled "the Other Good Samaritan." The one who returned to give thanks was not who we would have expected. He was not one of the righteous ones. He was not a well-bred, pillar of society, someone who follows to the advice of Emily Post about writing a timely thank you note. Nor was it an Elder on the Session or a kindly pious church member who sits among

the back pews. The one who came back to thank Jews was a Samaritan.

Perhaps those words fail to strike the note of stunning surprise it might have had for 1st century audiences. Keep in mind that the Samaritans were the despised neighbor of the Jews. Twice in this gospel Jesus told a story about an unexpected good deed, and then surprised his audience by saying that it was a Samaritan who did it. Perhaps if we said that this man was a Mexican immigrant worker or a radical jihadist we might feel the same jolt.

But Jesus uses this shocking revelation to open our eyes to a deeper truth. With this story, Luke begins a series of stories about people who exhibit a faithful response to the words and ministry of Jesus. But these who are faithful are not whom we expect; it is not the disciples, or the other followers of Jesus who are represented in these stories. Rather, these stories are filled with people from the margins of 1st century Jewish society,ⁱⁱ who have no power or position. And yet they are the people who are used to show us how to respond faithfully to God's good gifts. For example, here we have someone who is considered unclean and a foreigner as well [Luke 17:11-19]. In the next chapters, we will read about a widow [18:1-18], a tax collector [18:9-14], and a group of children [19:1-10] who display for us examples of a faithful response to God's grace.

Each of the ten lepers had their lives changed by their encounter with Jesus. From this point on, their lives were different. They

were no longer living in the past, but living in the present tense.

"Living our faith in the present tense" is the theme for this year's stewardship campaign. This coming week, you will be receiving in a red envelope an invitation to participate in supporting the mission of this congregation. But as we think about our stewardship, we understand that it is something more than paying the bills of the church, or meeting our obligation as a member of a civic organization. For the Christian, stewardship, the giving of our time, talents and treasures, is one of the means by which we give thanks to God for all the graces, expected and unexpected, that come into our lives.

Throughout the scriptures, God has called the people of God to bring their tithes and offerings to the priest, to the temple, to the church, so that God's work might continue to unfold. It is a way in which our faith continues to live in the present tense.

But there is still that interesting question that Jesus asked in this story: "The other nine, where are they?" Part of our story this morning is told through the experience of the nine who didn't return. Maybe they didn't notice the change in their lives. Maybe after years of suffering and rejection they felt they deserved this healing. Maybe they just wanted to get on with their lives. But they didn't come back. They didn't offer their word of thanks.

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges we have as a people of faith is to say thank you to God. We seemingly have no difficulty expressing our anger

or fears to God. The Book of Psalms is full of cries of pain or help. Our prayers are filled with our concerns about what is happening to us or to those we love, or to the world in which we live and share with our global neighbors. But how many times do we stop to return to God to give thanks for the blessings of our lives?

Lucy Hogan, who teaches preaching at Wesley Theological Seminary, remembers a story told in her Sunday School class when she was a young girl. There were two angels sent to earth to collect all the prayers. One was sent to retrieve petitions, the other thanksgivings. Each angel was given a basket. The one sent to pick up the thanksgivings choose the biggest basket, thinking that there would be so many prayers of thanksgiving that she would need the largest basket she could find. Meanwhile, the angel who went to pick up all the prayers of petition, the plaintive pleas to God for help or wisdom or assurance, took a small basket, and had to return over and over again for her basket was always filled to overflowing. In the end, the angel who went to collect the prayers of thanksgiving returned with the same basket not even half full.ⁱⁱⁱ

How grateful are we for the gifts we have received from God? Each of us has received the rich blessings of God in our lives, health, comfort, family, life, grace and salvation. What do we bring to God as an offering of our thanks? When it comes to our thanksgiving for all these good gifts, we must pause and ask, are we among the nine, or the one who came back to give thanks?

ⁱ Leviticus 13:45-46: “The person who is leprous shall wear torn clothes and ... uncover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall live alone; his dwelling place shall be outside the camp.”

ⁱⁱ Joel B. Green, “Luke” *The New Interpreters’ Study Bible*, (Abingdon, 2003), 1886

ⁱⁱⁱ Lucy Lind Hogan, *New Proclamation, Year C*, (Fortress Press, 2004), 223

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