

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

¹¹ It that as he made his way toward Jerusalem, he crossed over the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men, all lepers, met him. They kept their distance ¹³ but raised their voices, calling out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ Taking a good look at them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." They went, and while still on their way, became clean. ¹⁵ One of them, when he realized that he was healed, turned around and came back, shouting his gratitude, glorifying God. ¹⁶ He kneeled at Jesus' feet, so grateful. He couldn't thank him enough—and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Were not ten healed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up. On your way. Your faith has healed and saved you."

Many years ago, a boat was wrecked in a storm on Lake Michigan at Evanston, Illinois. Students from Northwestern University formed themselves into rescue teams. One student, Edward Spencer, saved seventeen people from the sinking ship. When he was carried exhausted to his room, he asked, "Did I do my best? Do you think I did my best?"

Years later, R. A. Torrey, an American evangelist, Congregational pastor, educator, and writer, was talking about this incident at a meeting in Los Angeles, and a man in the audience called out that Edward Spencer was present. Dr. Torrey invited Spencer to the platform. An old man with white hair, slowly climbed the steps as the applause rang. Dr. Torrey asked him if anything in particular stood out in his memory about this event. "Only this, sir," he replied, "of the seventeen people I saved, not one of them thanked me."

This story of ingratitude is similar to an experience Jesus had. In today's passage from Luke, Jesus is on a road trip, moving between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. As he enters a village, 10 lepers approach him and call out from a distance, raising their voices in unison, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:13). They are desperate for healing, but as unclean people they don't dare rush up to Jesus. They know that they are supposed to keep their distance, and live outside the community. So, they shout to get Jesus' attention.

Jesus sees them and decides to help them. He said to them: "Go and show yourselves to the priests" (v. 14). To us, this sounds a bit strange and unhelpful. But this command was significant in Jesus' day because everyone knew that a leper who was fortunate enough to be healed had to show himself to a priest. Only a priest could certify that a person was truly clean and able to return to the community. So, when Jesus sends them to see the priest, the lepers are hopeful that Jesus' plan is to heal them.

As the lepers make their way toward the priests, they are miraculously healed, and one of them, Leper No. 10, immediately turns around and runs back to Jesus, all the while, praising God with a loud voice. He then falls at Jesus' feet and thanks him generously.

Only one returned to Jesus to thank him for healing. One out of 10. "Were not ten made clean?" asks Jesus, sounding a bit miffed. "But the other nine, where are they?" (v. 17). Only one takes the time to count his blessings. That's a 10 percent return; which is really quite pathetic. But here's where the story begins to challenge us, inviting us to consider, are we doing any better at thanking Jesus for his help and blessings?

Now, keep in mind that the other nine lepers did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They were going to show themselves to the priest at the temple. They were following Jesus' instructions. We can't fault them for that.

But gratitude and thanksgiving move us beyond the requirement, the acceptable, the ordinary. It's taking that extra step above and beyond obedience, to express what is in one's heart, to accept the change that is made in one's life because of what God does for us. Genuine thankfulness changes a person. A gracious attitude and lifestyle makes one happier, healthier, hopeful, and a lot more pleasant to be around. A gracious attitude and lifestyle refocuses our attention towards God and the goodness of life.

In Budapest, a man goes to the rabbi and complains, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?"

The rabbi answers, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man was in disbelief, but the rabbi insists. "Do as I say and come back in a week."

A week later the man comes back looking more distraught than before. "We cannot stand it," he tells the rabbi. "The goat is filthy."

The rabbi then tells him, "Go home and let the goat out. And come back in a week."

A radiant man returns to the rabbi a week later, exclaiming, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat—only the nine of us."

Let's face it, sometimes we just are not satisfied with what we have in life, be it wealth, material things, relationships or whatever else we think we need to be happy, and if we don't feel happy, we may think we have nothing for which to be grateful, so we just complain. Do you know anyone like that?

Then there are those like the other nine healed lepers, who I am sure were very happy to be healed, and yet they did not turn around to thank Jesus. Why did only one cleansed leper return to thank Jesus?

Here's nine suggested reasons for why they did not return: One waited to see if the cure was real. One waited to see if it would last. One said he would see Jesus later. One decided that he had never had leprosy. One said he would have gotten well anyway. One gave the glory to the priests. One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything." One said, "Any rabbi could have done it." One said, "I was already much improved."

The truth is that we just don't know why the other nine did not go back to thank Jesus; and we don't need to know why, because there is something much more important to learn from this story.

In the story of the 10 lepers, the biggest surprise is that Leper who returned to thank Jesus was a Samaritan. This comes as a shock to most of Jesus' followers watching this story unfold before their eyes, because they see Samaritans as low-life losers, second-class citizens, members of the wrong race, region, and religion. The Samaritan is not a respectable member of the community at all. Yet, he is the only one to return to Jesus to express gratitude. And that, according to Jesus, makes all the difference. It showed Jesus that while the others had experienced the healing of their bodies, this fellow had found healing in his soul.

Jesus criticizes the nine decent lepers who went on their way without so much as a thank-you. But Jesus said to Leper No. 10, "Your faith has made you well." Jesus gives him affirmation not so much for the faith that asked for healing, but for the faith that returned to give thanks. After all, it's a grateful faith—not a gimme faith—that saves us.

We learn from Jesus, that the lepers not only needed some physical healing, but they also needed some soul-healing, and it's no doubt that this is what many people need today, and they're not going to find it until they are able to count their blessings and express their gratitude, just as the tenth leper did.

It is gratitude that prompted an old man to visit an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly and slightly stooped with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them from his bucket. Many years before, in October 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But there was an unexpected detour which would hurl Captain Eddie into the most harrowing adventure of his life.

Somewhere over the South Pacific the Flying Fortress became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, so the men ditched their plane in the ocean. For nearly a month, Captain Eddie and his companions would fight the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many sleepless nights recoiling as giant sharks rammed their rafts. The largest raft was nine by five. The biggest shark was ten feet long.

But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone or destroyed by the salt water. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, "Cherry," that was the B-17 pilot, Captain William Cherry, "read the service that afternoon, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off."

Now this is still Captain Rickenbacker talking: "Something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull. The gull meant food—if I could catch it."

And the rest, as they say, is history. Captain Eddie caught the gull. Its flesh was eaten. Its intestines were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice. You know that Captain Eddie made it.

And now you also know that he never forgot. Because every Friday evening, about sunset on a lonely stretch along the eastern Florida seacoast, you could see an old man walking—white-haired, bushy-eyebrowed, slightly bent. His bucket filled with shrimp to feed the gulls—to remember that one which, on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle like manna in the wilderness.

(Paul Aurandt, "The Old Man and the Gulls," Paul Harvey's The Rest of the Story, 1977, quoted in Heaven Bound Living, Knofel Stanton, Standard, 1989, p. 79-80.)

God is good! God has blessed us in so very many ways. Have you noticed the blessings God has given you? And if so, have you thanked God? If we can remember to be grateful, we'll find ourselves even healthier in body, mind, and spirit. We'll feel better about our lives, more optimistic about our prospects and more helpful toward people around us. After all, Jesus proclaimed it—a grateful faith can make us whole. Amen.