How Can I Say Thanks?

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Luke 17:11-19

*Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.*

Luke 17:15-16

Those ten lepers. I’ve preached about them countless times. Many of my thoughts, I will confess are pretty judge-y. After all, hasn’t Jesus released them from a lifetime of pain, humiliation, marginalization, and the judgment of others? The least the nine could have done was to join their brother-in-misery in saying thanks. I have often felt like the parent of a young child who has been given something nice by an uncle or auntie, and the parent says to the delighted child, ready to run off in glee, *now, what do you say?* We want our children to grow up knowing and practicing proper etiquette. It reflects poorly on us when our kids don’t live up to society’s expectations. My natural reaction then to the nine cured lepers is something akin to *why didn’t their parents teach them good manners, at least?* After all, this wasn’t just some nice thing someone gave them; Jesus healed them from a lifetime of misery, for goodness sake. I’m sure some of you here are thinking similar thoughts. Expressing gratitude is the least they could have done.

But it’s not as simple as that; it never seems to be with Jesus. It’s not about the obligatory nicety of uttering the words that are at play here. It’s more about the cultivation of a spirit of gratitude and living out of that spirit. David Lose tells of a friend who would respond to his polite question, “How are you?” by saying “I’m grateful.” It took him aback the first time she said it. Not just the first or second time, but almost every time, “I’m grateful. He reflected on this: “Eventually, of course, I wasn’t so much surprised, as I was struck by the simplicity and power of this statement. It wasn’t the answer I expected. Indeed, we usually expect little more than “fine” or “pretty good” or maybe once and a while ‘great’ when we ask this conversational placeholder, ‘How are you?’”

“I’m grateful.” His colleague chose her words with care and intentionality. She wanted to make a point. The point being that gratitude is not only a response to good fortune but also a choice we make.

Certainly that’s true of the leper in today’s Gospel reading. Ten were healed. Ten, no doubt, were surprised at this discovery. Perhaps some were overjoyed. Understandable. Perhaps some celebrated. Again, quite natural. Perhaps others ran to tell their family and friends. Perhaps a few even took it for granted. Who knows? What we do know is that one not only felt thankful but decided to actually give voice to that spirit, to express his gratitude to Jesus and to God. Gratitude is indeed a response to the blessings of life, but it is also a choice to see those blessings, name them, and express our gratitude in word and deed.

And giving voice to gratitude is a **choice** with consequences, for as we express our gratitude, we affect those around us, even shape the reality in which we live.

When we choose to live gratefully, we shape our reality, and do not allow that which is going on around us to shape us. If we live gratefully only when things are going right, then we will live fully dependent on the peaks and valleys of life as our barometer.

Think about it. Gratitude is not the only emotion we might choose to express to respond to the events of any given day. There are reasons for gratitude, yes, but also good reasons to fear, to get angry, for frustration, grief, for regret, for apprehension. All of these color our experience, make its appearance on the stage of our lives, and perhaps each has a place and role to play from time to time. But we **choose** how much stage time to grant each of these emotions by giving them expression, and as we do so we give them power in our lives.

And that’s what’s key: we make choices. We may feel a range of emotions to all kinds of circumstances and situations, but we choose those to which we will give expression. When confronted by someone who is angry, do we respond with anger as a form of self-protection or do we choose empathy, trying to understand the emotions of the other, and gratitude that the person was willing to be honest? When we are set back in some endeavor at home or work, do we express frustration or a resolve to keep at it and gratitude for what we’ve learned through this setback? These are choices.

Joe Ingle is a colleague of mine who is living with multiple sclerosis. I met Joe while working on the death penalty for the UCC. Joe is a spiritual advisor to a number of men on death row, in Florida and in Tennessee. He is the reason I met my good friend, Ndume, on death row in Nashville. Joe has witnessed 22 executions our brutal society has chosen to inflict on fellow human beings, doing so at the request of the executed. Anyway, after much treatment and prayer, the MS is not advancing, but it cannot be cured. One day it may eventually take his life. But not today. And Joe is not only grateful for each day, but also shares that gratitude. I suspect he has moments where he feels bitter or resentful or fearful or any of the other range of emotions that would be completely understandable, but he chooses to live gratefully, viewing each day as another gift of grace and giving voice to his gratitude.

“I’m grateful.” Take a moment to scan the headlines. Look around you. Listen to the voices out there and you’ll see how scarce – and how desperately needed – more expressions of gratitude can be. Accusations, making excuses, venting anger – these seem to have a grip on our culture. Indeed, we seem to live in a culture of complaint, as author Robert Hughes called it, whether shared in person or increasingly through the venue of social media. What a powerful response gratitude is in these situations.

In this light, saying “I’m grateful” does not simply express our thanksgiving but actually gives voice to a counter-cultural witness that has the power to shape those around us, push back the tide of resentment and complaint that ails us, and make room for a fresh appreciation of God’s renewing, saving grace.

I’d like to think that one leper who said thanks saw and felt something deeper than being liberated from that dreaded disease, a kind of living death sentence. Don’t get me wrong: being healed from disease is a wondrous, life-changing thing. But, in my imagination, I see that man, a few moments after the realization that he was healed, having a more profound insight. I can see him, dancing after his nine brothers-in-misery, but slowing to a halt. I see the profundity of the moment hitting him like a two-by-four. It dawned on him: it was God at work. God. Slowly turning, he walks back to the Great Healer. With tears flowing, he simply utters, “Thank you. Thank you. I’m grateful.”