

Thanksgiving and Discipleship

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 17: 11-19

Delivered on October 13, 2019

To be a leper in Jesus' day was something we don't have a modern equivalent to. To be a leper in Jesus' day meant you were not allowed to live in the community with anyone that you loved or grew up with. You were cast out. To be a leper meant you would not be touched by other people. And to be a leper meant that most people would have been convinced that you would not have such a disease if you had not done something to offend God in some way. We have no modern equivalent to what it was like to live with leprosy, probably the closest thing we had to it was what it must have been like to live with AIDS in the first decade of the disease. People who had AIDS in the 1980s are no longer around to tell their stories, but if you lived with AIDS in the 1980s, chances are you also knew what it was like to be shunned by your community. If you lived with AIDS in the 80s people were afraid to touch you or give you a hug. If you lived with AIDS in the 80s unfortunately you probably also knew people who claimed to speak to you for God but who weren't really interested in doing anything to ease your suffering, but were only interested in knowing what you must have done to offend God if you are suffering in this way.

To be a leper in Jesus' day was to suffer terribly, and so anyone with leprosy who would be healed by this disease would naturally get down on their knees and affectionately thank who ever healed them. But today we have an odd story. We have a story where Jesus heals ten people who are afflicted with leprosy but only one of them comes back to thank Jesus for his gift of healing. But maybe you say that's not so odd. Maybe if you were to sit down and talk with me, you tell me that you do nice things for people all the time and you know what it's like

to have only about ten percent of them thank you. I hope not. I hope not because even though we ought not to do kind things for people in order to be thanked, and even though we don't do them to win other people's approval and praise, it is natural to feel discouraged when we don't get their thanks, their approval, their praise.

It was easy for Jesus to heal these ten lepers. In fact, he told the one who thanked him that it was his faith that made him well, as if to say it wasn't me at all. But easy or not, we thank people for doing something kind for us which they didn't have to do. You may tell me, what do you mean Jesus didn't have to do kind things for people. Of course he had to. He was a perfect person and so it was in his nature to do kind things for people. If you know anything about the bible, then you know that Jesus could no more have been mean to people than he could have stopped being the Son of God. Being kind was just who he was.

But that's not what I mean when I say he did something he didn't have to. What I mean is he didn't have to be kind because no one was forcing him to be kind. No one was threatening to cut off his head or throw him in a dungeon if he didn't show kindness. And that's what I mean when I say he didn't have to be kind.

Nine of the ten, nine of the ten people whom Jesus healed of their leprosy did not even bother to come back and thank him, but one of them did. And what was so special about this one? What was different about this one? Well, we are told that as Jesus went out to meet these ten he was on the border between Galilee and Samaria. We can think of him these days of being in some border town like El Paso or Brownsville, Texas. And as he heals the ten, one of them is from over the border. One of them is from this foreign country of Samaria, and he is the one who comes back and thanks Jesus.

And why? What about this man being a Samaritan meant that he came back and thanked Jesus? Why is that important? Well, we don't know for sure, but it could be because he never expected Jesus to do anything kind for him. As a foreigner he probably thought that Jesus was only supposed to help the Jews. He was their Messiah after all. When Jesus was nailed to the cross there was a sign that hung over him that said Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judeorum. Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. He was known as the King of the Jews, the long awaited Messiah of the Jews. Why would he do something nice for someone who wasn't even a Jew? So maybe that's why he came back and thanked the Lord. Maybe he was surprised and overcome with gratitude. And maybe that's why the other nine chose not to thank him. They chose not to thank the Lord and maybe that was because they thought that as Jews they were entitled to their healing. We don't thank people for doing what they're supposed to do. Not once, not one time have I ever looked in my rearview mirror and seen blue lights flashing only to have an officer step out of his car and thank me for driving the speed limit. That's just what I'm supposed to do. Not once, not one time have I ever had a retail store send me a gift card and a thank you note because they noticed I didn't shop lift the last time I was in their store. No, that's just what I'm supposed to do. Not once, not one time have I ever been invited as a dinner guest in someone's home and been thanked for using my table manners and not throwing the food on the floor. You might thank a small child for doing that, but for adults that would be strange to say the least. That's just what I'm supposed to do. And so while we don't know for sure, and we should be careful speculating about things we don't know for sure, maybe that's why the nine didn't thank Jesus. "This is what we're entitled to. This is what we deserve from our own King, from our own Messiah. This is just what we'd expect from one of our own."

If this is right, if this is even somewhat on the right track, then I think the question for all of us is, which of these characters are we in this story? Which of these people would sum up who we are and what our attitude is toward God? And when you think about the question that way, I think you come to realize that our whole life of Christian discipleship is a single act of giving thanks to God. We receive from God the grace, the mercy, and the providence that we do not deserve, none of which we deserve, and so we respond in a life of gratitude. That's what it means to follow Christ.

Unfortunately, talking about the thanks, indeed the lives of thanks we owe to God is probably not going to fill up these pews on a Sunday morning. I have never seen a church bursting at the seams because it told people they owed thanks to God for what he has already done for us. What people seem to want to know is what further goodies God is going to give to us, not what he has already given. But when you are awakened to the good news of the gospel, you come to see that it is not the world that changes around us, it is you who change. So maybe we should ask ourselves how it would change us to see God not as owing things to us but as being gracious to us. How would it change us if every time we gathered here to confess our sins, we were surprised to hear the words of pardon. I know that we talk about these words of pardon as a matter of routine. I know that we talk about God's grace as a matter of routine. In the ritual of our worship together, all this grace talk and forgiveness talk is as automatic as some ATM transaction. But what if we didn't see it that way?

A girl named Maria grew up with her mother Sonia and her father Antonio in a little hut with a dirt floor in a village in Argentina. When she was little, though she was very poor, Maria was a happy child, always smiling with a smile that lit up her whole face. Her father, Antonio

had a short life, he was always doing the back-breaking work of a South American peasant, and so he died when Maria was about ten. And then when Maria got to be about fourteen or fifteen she began to have a mind of her own and the little hut in the village suddenly seemed too small for her and her mother. So after stealing all the money out of her mothers' purse while she slept, she walked five miles to a bus station and caught a bus to Buenos Aires, and as she slept on the bus for the four hour trip, she dreamed of the bright lights of the big city. But before she left she was still sweet and innocent enough to have left a note for her mother saying that she was sorry for what she had done, but she must run away from home for a new life because she couldn't stand her old one anymore. Upon waking and reading her daughter's note, Sonia was naturally terrified. You see, she knew that without any real education or job skills, Maria would end up in a life of prostitution or she would end up joining some street gang, but with all her money stolen it would be weeks before she could earn enough to go track her daughter down. A few weeks went by and Sonia got her own bus ticket to Buenos Aires. She carried with her a picture of Maria in her purse, and she went to the police and stopped in all the seedy night spots and bars in town but no one had seen her daughter. Finally, she went to one of those photo booths that you see at amusement parks and fairs and she paid to have several pictures taken of herself which she posted everywhere she thought Maria might be, with a message on the back of each of them. Some weeks later, Maria was coming down the staircase of a sordid hotel, tired and hungry and heartbroken at how her dreams of Buenos Aires had turned into nightmares. And there at the bottom of the staircase, she saw a picture of her mother posted to the wall. She turned it over, and there in Spanish it said "It doesn't matter what you have done. I love you, come home."

What if we could hear that surprising message every time we passed through those two doors? It doesn't matter what you have done. I love you, come home. What if we could hear that surprising message instead of some message that might as well come out of an ATM machine, it has become so automatic for us. Wouldn't that change our lives? Would that makes us a lot more like the one leper who said thank you in this story, and a lot less like the nine who did not? It may not fill up the pews on a Sunday morning, it may not be the message our society wants to hear. But for all that, it is still true. We don't deserve anything we get from the hand of God. And the sooner we realize that, the sooner our lives will be changed. The sooner our lives will be changed in a way that we may not even know we were looking for. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.