

## The Thankful Samaritan

*A sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

*2 Kings 5:1-15 and Luke 17:11-19*

*Almighty God, you brought us through the waters of baptism to the shores of new life. Accept the offering of our lives, and let us enter your house, there to praise your unfailing power and love, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Some of you may remember Aesop's fable about "The Wolf and the Crane" which tells of Wolf who had been gorging on an animal he had killed when suddenly a piece of sharp bone became lodged in his throat. Unable to swallow the bone, Wolf began to feel unbearable pain in his throat. Back and forth, up and down, Wolf paced and howled, begging and groaning for anything to relieve the pain, pleading for someone to remove the bone.

"I would give anything," he howled, "I would pay any reward to someone who could take it out."

At last Crane agreed to give it a try, asking the Wolf to lie on his side and open his jaws as wide as he could. Then Crane dared to insert its long neck down Wolf's open throat, and with its hefty beak Crane managed to loosen the bone and finally wrench it out of the Wolf.

"Now," asked Crane, "about that reward you promised to pay."

The Wolf grinned bitterly, showing his pointed teeth, "Be content, Crane," growled the Wolf, "You have put your head inside a wolf's mouth and taken it out safely. That ought to be reward enough for you."

The moral of the story: "In serving the wicked, expect no reward, and be thankful if you escape injury for your pains." Or, a bit more simple: "Greed and gratitude go not together."

It was the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Karl Barth, who said it this way, "Grace and gratitude go together—grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth." Or, as when someone asked Martin Luther to describe the meaning of true worship, he replied by saying, "The tenth leper turning back."

Out in Samaria, well out of bounds, in the middle of no man's land, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus meets ten lepers. Long ago, the Levitical Code had instructed that "The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean' . . . He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." No one dares come close to a leper; no leper dares come close to anyone, not members of his family, not members of her religious community. But Jesus, crossing the proscribed boundaries, in the middle of no man's land, on his way to Jerusalem, dares to come close. Jesus, referring to that same Levitical Code, looks at the ten lepers, tells them to go back to the temple and show themselves to the priests, thus reentering the communal life of their families and synagogues. They go; and as they go, ten lepers received healing, but only one returns to give thanks. Ten are cleansed, but only one is whole. Ten are healed, but only one is saved. Ten get better, but only one gets the best.

"Were not ten made clean?" Jesus asks, "But the other nine, where are they?"

It is a question of mine that begs an answer every Sunday morning when I walk into this sanctuary and see one out of every nine lepers who has returned to give thanks. "But the other nine, where are they?" I ask myself.

"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice," not just a quiet thank you, but "praising God with a loud voice, he threw himself down at Jesus' feet and

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thanked him." Then Luke makes a point of telling us that this one leper is a Samaritan. Remember, Luke made a point of telling us there was a *good Samaritan*; now he makes sure we know that there's also a *thankful Samaritan*.

The Samaritan is a foreigner as was Naaman the Syrian who makes his appearance in the First Lesson today. The word used here for "foreigner" literally means "other genes" or "other race" and was used by the Jewish people to describe those of other ethnic origins who were forbidden on penalty of death to enter the inner courts of the Temple, persons from whom they were to be kept separate. But the outsider in the midst of the ten—the foreigner who is already the outcast of Jewish society before he was ever an outcast as a leper—turns away from the other nine and praises Jesus. The man with at least two strikes against him worships God with body and voice, yes, with his whole being because he just can't do anything else but "praise God with a loud voice." How can you keep from singing when something so

wonderful has happened to you? I ask that question of you this morning.

Sometimes it takes an outsider to teach us insiders just what it means to be grateful; maybe because we who have experienced the graces of God for such a long time have forgotten that "grace and gratitude go together like heaven and earth." Or is it rather with us that "greed and gratitude go not together?"

Maybe the leprosy of today that leads to the aching loneliness that so many feel is a deep-rooted feeling that I somehow have the right to things, that I owe no one anything and have no responsibility for anyone. It is a deep self-centeredness that leads me to believe that everything is my right, an attitude that displaces the needs of others with my own needs, allowing me to maintain my distance in the illusion of absolute independence.

"Were not ten made clean?" Jesus asks, "But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

I think it is interesting that Jesus doesn't seek *gratitude for himself* but *glory to God* for the healing. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And you know what? No response is required, nor is any debt owed. No gratitude is expected in return for the grace that is given. You don't have to make an offering, not of prayer nor praise, not of bending the knee nor singing a hymn, not of service to others nor of charity to the needy. You don't even have to drop an envelope in the offering plate, the minimal expression of gratitude.

Greed and gratitude go not together. Grace and gratitude go together. I don't suppose God needs our gratitude, but maybe we need to be grateful and express that gratitude without reserve. Do you suppose?

Stewardship is not first of all about giving. Stewardship ("management," to use a more contemporary term) is about seeing all that we have been given and rejoicing in a way that cannot help but shape how we live. We can go our own way like the other nine, or we can return like the one who came back to give God glory. Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. We can respond to God's grace and

faithfulness with worship, bowing our bodies and bending the knee at the Lord's Table at which we participate in the Eucharist, a word itself derived from the Greek *eucharistein* which means "to give

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thanks,” thus the “Great Thanksgiving” in the liturgy.

The emphasis of this story is not the miracle of ten lepers being cleansed but rather the contrast of gratitude and ingratitude, of thankfulness and forgetfulness, of seeing and not seeing. Faith is not a matter of just believing. Faith is also a matter of seeing. All the lepers were healed, but only one was able to see. And because he sees what has happened, the leper recognizes Jesus, his reign and his power. Because he sees what has happened, the leper has something for which to be thankful, praising God with a loud voice. Because he sees what has happened, the leper changes direction, veering from his course toward a priest to first return to Jesus. In the face of adversity, do we see danger or opportunity? In the face of human need, do we see demand or gift? In the face of the stranger, do we see potential enemy or friend?

We have been given so much, but we see so very little. When you are an insider, one of the family, you tend to expect things, to take them for granted, and what was once a gift becomes a right.

Over the years, as I have listened to people's testimonials of what God has done for them in their lives, I have noted a common theme in their testimonies. They will often tell of God's gracious work in their lives in delivering them from some illness, or in giving them some opportunity, or opening up some door for them, or leading them to sobriety and release from an addiction.

“God is good!” they say, and then in the next breath they say, “Now I want to give myself to this . . . ,” or “Now that God has been so good to me I'm committed to do something about that . . . .”

Ultimately, this story is not about getting better but getting the best, not just about being well but being grateful.

“Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth . . . Grace and worship belong together like heaven and earth.”

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—Pastor Lauritsen