

Faith That Gives Thanks
Second in a Series of Four Sermons, "Faith Alive"
18th Sunday after Pentecost
October 8 and 9, 2022

Luke 17: Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last week we explored the difference between a faith that is alive and growing vs a faith that is just sort of sitting there, in neutral, stagnant, coasting - go ahead and pick your own metaphor. We focused on the fact that a growing faith asks good questions, like the disciples who cried for Jesus to please give them more faith, and Paul, who asked one of the best questions ever recorded, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Today's sermon will explore the difference between a faith that is regularly expressing gratitude to the one true God in a meaningful and sincere fashion vs a faith that is just sort of sitting there, in neutral, minding its own business, doing its own thing, grateful in a generic kind of a way.

A very successful businessman had a meeting with his new son-in-law.

"I love my daughter, and now I welcome you into the family," said the man. "To show you how much we care for you, I'm making you a 50-50 partner in my business. All you have to do is go to the factory every day and learn the operations."

The son-in-law interrupted, "I hate factories. I can't stand the noise."

"I see," replied the father-in-law. "Well, then you could work in the office and take charge of some of the operations."

"I hate office work," said the son-in-law. "I can't stand being stuck behind a desk all day."

"Wait a minute," said the father-in-law. "I just offered to make you a half-owner of a money making organization, but you don't like factories and won't work in an office. What am I going to do with you?"

"Easy," said the young man. "Buy me out."

Now there's a young man who must have slept through Manners 101 class, where rule #1 is that whenever anyone does or says anything nice to or for you, give them a sincere thank you. And rule #2 is that if someone does something nice that is

major and life changing and beneficial for you, well then you will want to spend the rest of your life giving and showing them your sincere thanks.

In today's sermon, we learn from two foreigners - a Samaritan and a Moabite - about what it means to have a faith focused on Jesus Christ that is alive and well and grateful in a contagious and obvious way. Two lessons we want to learn today about a faith that gives thanks. *First, when it comes to expressing gratitude, words matter. Secondly, gratitude is about more than words.*

When it comes to expressing gratitude, words matter.

Three kinds of words come to mind, today, in terms of expressing gratitude. First there are words we say to ourselves. Secondly, there are words we say to other people. And third, there are words we direct towards God.

The words we say to ourselves matter. And saying thank you to people in our lives who are helping and befriending us is a great thing to do. But neither of those two kinds of gratitude are specific to Christianity. Positive thinking is good for your mental health, and saying thank you to people is just good manners. But returning thanks to the giver of all good gifts is a matter of Christian faith. Faith that is alive and well develops this good habit of returning thanks to God, who is good and his mercy endures forever.

As we apply these three kinds of words to today's text, we would note that thoughts, by definition, are words we say to ourselves. It seems likely, even certain, that all ten lepers had grateful thoughts for being cleansed from their leprosy. Scholars describe leprosy as beginning with a loss of all sensation in parts of the body. Nerve trunks are affected. Muscles waste away. Tendons contract until the hands are like claws. Hands and feet ulcerate. Then comes the progressive loss of fingers and toes, until in the end a whole hand or a whole foot may drop off. Lepers are ceremonially unclean. They are unwelcome in the temple. Unwelcome in their family circle. According to law, they were permanently quarantined, socially distanced, masked up, and whenever normal people approached, they would shout, "unclean, unclean."

As they went on their way, all ten lepers were healed on their way to show themselves to the priests in Jerusalem. We're not just talking a two mile walk in the park here. We're talking about a 20 or 30 mile journey. Uphill. We don't know if it was after a couple miles or when they were almost there, but slowly, mysteriously, miraculously, somewhere along the way, their leprosy left them.

There can be no doubt in our minds that all ten lepers were thankful. No doubt they had thankful thoughts. No doubt they high fived each other (or whatever they did back then to celebrate). I suspect they even praised God in heaven above. All ten lepers went from having no good options in life to having two good options. One option would be to go show themselves to the priests, get themselves declared clean, get reunited with their families and when time permitted, say thank you to Master Jesus. That option is the one chosen by the nine. Let's call it Option A.

Option A represents any of us who have ever been grateful to God in a generic kind of way. Do you know what I mean? Those days when our faith is just sort of sitting there. It's in neutral. We're just sort of minding our own business, getting on with our lives, not really focused on the privileges and the joy and the peace that come along with the forgiveness of our sins.

A seminary classmate named Robin Fish comments "we can note especially that those who were Jews, the ones who should have known better, whose religious upbringing should have prepared them, were not grateful, but the Gentile - the outsider was. I have seen that too. I had two weddings on one specific day, which turned out to be among the hottest days of the summer. The wedding party of the church members who were getting married were drunk and showed no reverence for the place they were to sanctify their nuptials. The unbelievers who had come to be married, and had received marital counseling and weeks of training in the fundamentals of the Christian faith just so that they could use the church for their wedding were humble, and pious, and treated our church with reverence and awe and gratitude. This lesson could be about how familiarity breeds contempt and how those who should treasure the riches of their faith and heritage often take them for granted and forget all about thanksgiving, which would be a cautionary tale for all of us.

Option B, the one chosen by the Samaritan in our text, was to put first things first. It wasn't just to have thankful thoughts. It wasn't just to send a thank you note when time permitted. It wasn't just to get on with life and enjoy the new privileges and joyfulness of a brand new leprosy free life. No, it was to get back into the presence of Jesus as fast as he could. It was to fall down on his face as flat as he could possibly fall. It was to give thanks and glory to God as clearly and publicly as he could possibly give.

In last week's Gospel, Jesus taught the disciples not to expect thanks for doing what they were called to do as humble servants. But as this miracle unfolds before

their very eyes, they are shown that true faith always returns thanks to the one who has provided salvation. Last week, we saw that faith that is alive is one that is hearing and keeping and treasuring and holding on to the preaching and teaching of God's Word. This week, we learn that faith that is alive and well isn't just hearing and believing and holding onto the Good News of Jesus Christ crucified, risen, ascended, and coming back again soon. It is thankful in terms of attitude, it is thankful in terms of words spoken to neighbors and friends, and it is thankful in terms of worshiping and praising God in public.

Gratitude is about more than words.

Arise, go on your way, your faith has saved you. Those are the words of Jesus to the thankful Samaritan who put first things first. The cleansing of this leper's body is but a foretaste of a much greater cleansing.

The apostle John said it this way, ***But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.***

We don't know how this Samaritan leper's journey ended, but we do know how our Lord's journey to Jerusalem ended. My hunch is that the Samaritan leper spent the rest of his life praising and thanking and serving and obeying and doing whatever he could do to spread the good news of Jesus.

In the case of Jesus, we don't have to rely on hunches. We know that He carried on His own shoulders every one of our failures and flaws and frustrations. We know that He was beaten bloody on His own back for every one of our bad attitudes and bad habits and bad decisions. We know that He was chastised and slapped and spit at and wounded and nailed and forsaken and crucified until dead so that our sins of unthankfulness and self-centeredness and inattentiveness and worse could be washed clean, blotted out from the record books, sent away as far as the east is from the west, you pick the metaphor! The forgiveness of our sins, the cleansing of our souls is as certain as the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good and his mercy endureth forever.

I was tempted to say amen here and let it go at that. But I'd feel guilty if I only gave you 17 minute sermons instead of 22.

And so there's more. Gratitude is more than words of thankfulness to God. It's about loving our neighbors, in gratitude to God. And that's where another foreigner appears in our lessons for today. Her name is Ruth, and she is a Moabite.

Moabites have this in common with the Samaritans - they were hated enemies of Israel. Moab and his brother Ammon were products of incest between Lot and his two daughters. Lot was both the father and the grandpa of Moab, in case you wanted me to clarify.

In any case, the story of Ruth is a Hebrew short story that tells how this young Moabite woman became the great grandmother of David and the ancestor of Jesus. The book reveals much about self-sacrificial love, which is surely a metaphor for God's loving care. The circumstances of Ruth's promise to stay with her mother in law come hell or high water included 1) a famine in Judah 2) Naomi and her husband Elimelech moving from Bethlehem to the country of Moab 3) two sons born and getting married to local girls named Orpah and Ruth, 4) father and two sons dying, leaving a Naomi and her two daughters in law as widows, which in that day meant they were desperately in need of someone to provide and take care of them. 5) Naomi hearing that the famine in Judah was over and deciding to go home to her family. 6) The customary long goodbye, which in that day meant that loved ones would accompany them out of town as a send off and then say their sad farewells. 7) Orpah eventually agreed, kissed Naomi goodbye, and headed back home.

But Ruth was moved by the Holy Spirit to swear that Naomi's God would be her God, Naomi's family would be her family, Naomi's cemetery would be her cemetery, I will stay with you and be with you, until death parts us, so help me God.

Dear friends in Christ, today I would remind you of the waters of Holy Baptism, where the sign of the cross was placed upon your heart and upon your forehead, signifying that you are a dear, a precious, a forgiven, a ransomed, child of our Father in heaven.

I remind you of vows taken at Baptism and Confirmation, where we have promised to help one another spend our lives renouncing the devil and all of his evil works and ways, where we have promised to be diligent in the use of the means of grace, where we have promised to suffer all rather than fall away from the confession of our faith.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who have their not so great days, their good days, and their really good days.

On their not so great days, they are thankful to God for blessings received, but their faith is just sort of sitting there, there's something wrong, and they're not sure exactly what.

On their good days, they begin with the sign of the cross, they recognize that they are the dearly loved children of God, they cry out for the Master to have mercy upon them, and again and again, their consciences are declared clean.

On their really good days, they get themselves into the presence of Jesus as fast as they can, they return thanks and glory to God with sincere hearts, suffer patiently whatever crosses come their way, and they go looking for neighbors who need to be helped and befriended, in Jesus' Name. Amen.