

Give Thanks

Luke 17:11-19

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13 October 2013

Have you ever forgotten to say “thank you?” I know that my mother taught me to write a thank-you note when someone gives me a gift or prepares me a special meal. But more often than I would like to admit, I think about saying “thank you,” but somewhere along the way I get busy and eager to move on to the next thing and, despite my mother’s good advice, I neglect to write a thank you note. I have a list in my mind now of people to whom I owe a thank you note. My guilty conscience reminds me that feeling grateful and showing gratitude are not the same thing.

Or maybe you have forgotten to feel thankful altogether. It is easy to do. When things are not going according to plan or life throws us an unexpected curve ball, we can get so focused on the things that are going wrong that we forget to take note of what is going right and be thankful for those things. We might forget to “count our blessings,” as the saying goes.

In our gospel text today, nine out of ten lepers who encounter the healing power of Jesus somehow forget to give thanks. Now I do not know whether they forgot to feel thankful altogether. I suspect they were all feeling grateful; after all, they had just been cured from a disease that made them social and religious outcasts. But I bet they were also feeling eager to be accepted back into their communities, to be reunited with their families, and to resume worship in the temple. Eager to move on, they forgot to say “Thank you.”

Only one of the ten comes back to thank Jesus and glorify God. The other nine do as they are told and make their way to the priest. Only to this one who returns and gives thanks does Jesus give the double blessing: Go on your way; your faith has made you well. A better translation of the Greek would be that his faith, made known through his gratitude, “saved” him. “Your faith has saved you,” Jesus says. Only this one, a Samaritan - a double outsider - experiences wellness beyond physical healing. Only this one shows faith. For the Samaritan leper-made-clean, showing gratitude made the difference between being “better” and being “well.”

It is no coincidence that this story comes right on the heels of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples where the disciples implore their teacher, “Jesus, increase our faith!” The healing of the ten lepers is not only a story about the incredible healing power of Jesus, it is also a story about how to increase our faith. Faith, it seems, is deeply connected to gratitude. All ten lepers were cured in their bodies, but only the one who came back to say “thank you” is made well – is saved.

Jesus, increase our faith! Disciple, increase your gratitude!

Gratitude that increases our faith requires both recognition and proclamation. We are invited to experience renewed and deeper faith if we will but pause to recognize the gifts and blessings in

our lives and then proclaim our gratitude to the Giver of all good gifts. What are the blessings in your life? I would like you to take a moment to think about that. How have you experienced healing? Where have you seen Jesus' power at work? Who has been a sign of Christ's presence with you? Take a moment to think about that. But thinking about it is not enough. The other nine lepers might of been thinking about how grateful they were that Jesus cured their disease. But only one was saved: the one who showed gratitude. So here's the interactive part of the sermon. I want you to find someone sitting near you and tell them what you are grateful for. Be specific. Do not just say, "I'm thankful for my children." Instead, say "I'm blessed by my daughter's creativity." Ready? Go!

Lord, we thank you for these blessings.

Remembering to say thank you is a good exercise, but giving thanks is about more than good manners. I do not think Jesus has much interest in Emily Post. Giving thanks is also about more than self-help. A quick Google search will reveal a number of books and articles about how gratitude can boost your mood during difficult times. Good manners and self-help books have their place, but they are not the gospel. The good news of the gospel is that in showing gratitude, we draw nearer to God and remember our place as God's creatures who are dependent upon God for healing, wholeness, and salvation. Gratitude is an act of humility that increases our trust in the Lord.

Jesus, increase our faith! Disciple, increase your gratitude!

But gratitude is not only for times and places when our blessings are self-evident. Paul instructs the Thessalonian Christians to give thanks in all circumstances - even the circumstance of persecution and exclusion under which they were living (1 Thess 5:18). When the prophet Jeremiah writes to the Israelites living in exile, forcibly removed from their home in Jerusalem, he instructs them to rejoice in life's ordinary blessings - things like homes to live in, fields to cultivate, children who marry and bear grandchildren. While Jeremiah may not be grateful *for* the exile into enemy territory, he reminds that Israelites that even there God is with them, blessing them with good gifts that call for gratitude in the midst of exile. Give thanks in all circumstances.

The gratitude of the Israelites will increase their faith in the God who will finally keep his promise and restore them to their home in Jerusalem. Gratitude for life's simple blessings is a sign of trust that God remains faithful. Jeremiah will not tolerate constant nervousness or fear that God has abandoned his people. Neither will he allow the people to trust in false prophets that preach self-reliance or swift deliverance. Gratitude in the midst of difficulty reminds them and us that it is God, not us, who are finally in control. When we thank God for his faithfulness in the small and ordinary things, we find our faith increased in God when it comes to the big, extraordinary challenges that face our world, our church, and our families. There is war in Syria. There is economic recession and political deadlock in the United States. There is senseless murder in Charleston. There is tumult and turmoil in our families.

Jesus, increase our faith! Disciple, increase your gratitude!

What are the places of exile that affect you most deeply. What are the struggles that seem too big to overcome? I will not ask you to be grateful for your pain, at least not while you are in the midst of it. And I certainly will not ask you to be grateful for someone else's pain. What I do ask, and what I think Jeremiah is asking, is what can you be grateful for despite the difficult circumstances around you?

Three weeks ago, a Christian church in Pakistan was bombed killing 78 people and injuring 100 others as they closed their worship service. One news service reports that even outside of such violent persecution, "Christians have a precarious existence in Pakistan, often living in slum-like 'colonies' cheek-by-jowl with Muslims and fearful of allegations of blasphemy, a sensitive subject that can provoke outbursts of public violence." Despite their extreme minority status, after this church attack, Christians in Pakistan have found new cause for gratitude: in the weeks since that attack, Muslim neighbors have gathered outside Christian churches on Sunday mornings, linking arms to build human chains of protection.

I am not grateful for the exile and suffering of Christians in Pakistan. I am even careful about saying things like "I am so grateful for the ability to worship in safety." I am grateful for that, but said to casually it could come across as if I am content to let my brothers and sisters suffer as long as I am safe. Gratitude should never become a wall that isolates us from the suffering of others. What I am most grateful for is those people, especially those Muslims, who are willing to put their own lives at risk to protect their Christian neighbors. Thanks be to God for them! This is the kind of gratitude that may even increase my faith enough so that I might be willing to risk myself in love for a neighbor - even an outsider, even an enemy.

Jesus, increase our faith! Disciple, increase your gratitude!

Saying, "Thank you" is more than good manners. Counting our blessings is more than a self-help strategy. Gratitude is the power of the gospel at work to increase our faith so that we might take our place as the humble recipients of God's mercy; so that we might recognize that it is God's power, not our own, that saves us; so that we might stand alongside those who suffer as a sign of Christ's own presence.

Jesus, increase our faith! Disciple, increase your gratitude! May it be so. Amen.