

November 18, 2018



“MISSING THANKSGIVING”

Luke 17:11-19

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan

How many of you are familiar with World Vision’s 30 Hour Famine? For those of you who aren’t, the 30 Hour Famine is an event that is led in several churches, sometime in late February or at another agreed upon time. For 30 hours, youth and others within the church agree to go without eating in order to raise money in an effort to end hunger throughout the world.

Several years ago, when I first started out as a youth pastor, the youth at the church I was serving decided to participate in the 30 Hour Famine. So we got together at the church and planned all sorts of activities that would take their minds off of the fact that they weren’t eating for 30 hours. At breaks, we would have several energy drinks, juice, and water to keep their electrolytes up for the time. During the famine, we would go bowling, watch movies, and even gather at the church for an all-nighter.

To make the event more meaningful, we would break our fasting time together by sharing in a closing worship service that included communion (Eucharist) and gathering for a common meal with others who had supported us during that time. Our first year of organizing the event, our youth asked our senior pastor at the time to make a dish that he was known to do well as our breaking-the-fast meal. You know what it was? Prime rib. Yes, after not eating for 30 hours, they wanted to go all out and have prime rib with the senior pastor. The pastor agreed and that’s what they had. Little did any of them know that after not eating for 30 hours, the body was not ready for such a heavy meal. Before the meal, all they could think about was that prime rib, but when it came time to break the fast, prime rib felt way too heavy.

In other churches since that time, we’ve served breakfast or beans and rice as a reminder of the simple meals that others would be eating as a result of our efforts. Those meals were easier to digest than prime rib. They inspired within us a greater sense of gratitude for the opportunity to feel hunger all the while recognizing that our pangs would end while others still struggled for daily bread.

I think the most meaningful 30 Hour Famine experience I had, however, was at one of my first appointments. One of our youth, Sam, was diabetic. With all of his heart, Sam wanted to participate in the famine. He went out and got sponsors. He raised a fair amount of the group’s donations. He participated with all of the other youth in the events of the day. But every so often

throughout the famine, Sam would have to disappear. As a diabetic, Sam had to eat to keep his glucose levels stable. Wanting to fit in with the others, Sam resisted going to get a snack at times, but eventually he would go into another room and come back quickly because he wanted to be a part of the group. Sam's sacrifice was probably the most meaningful for me as a pastor because I knew how his heart's desire and his body's limits conflicted with one another. To this day, I'm inspired by Sam's faithful participation and the sense of gratitude he conveyed for the opportunity to participate, even though it was difficult for him to do so.

In our gospel lesson today, we hear the story of Jesus healing ten lepers as he travels in the area between Samaria and Galilee. While most good Jews go out of their way to avoid Samaria, we seem to find Jesus walking right through it yet again. Today, it seems that ten lepers stumble across his path, crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

It's amazing that this group of outcasts even cries out to Jesus. You see, in Jesus' day, it would not be unusual for a group of lepers to be in a colony. However, they would never try to approach another clean person, especially not someone known to be a teacher or a rabbi. I've heard it said that if you happened to come near and not notice, they had to announce their outcast presence by letting you know that they were "unclean." No righteous Jewish man or woman would want to be caught anywhere within earshot of those who struggled with leprosy. Compassion was never an option unless you wanted to be declared "unclean" as well. If you touched them, you could acquire their disease. At the very least, you'd have to participate in a ritual washing to be cleansed.

In the west, we really have no understanding of what the life of a leper might be like. We simply don't encounter it that much anymore since any skin disorder could have been considered leprosy in that day. We surely don't confine those rare instances of leprosy to colonies anymore; at least not in the United States.

Several years ago, when I traveled to India, I had the opportunity to visit a leper village where known "lepers" were treated for a variety of diseases. One of the biggest problems faced by the medical staff and others was that even after people were healed of their diseases, their families often would not receive them back home out of fear that the former lepers might bring a contagious disease back. "Once unclean, always unclean" seemed to be the thought of many of their families. Their status within that culture made them "untouchable" for life in several instances. No one would ever believe the doctor's word that they were cured and all was well.

So here in our scripture lesson is this group of outcasts, the untouchables of their day, calling out to Jesus. Out of compassion, Jesus responds, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." In that day, it was only a priest that could declare one cured of his or her disease. Jesus' words may have healed them, but their changed status had to be verified by those in authority. So off they went. Luke tells us that "As they went, they were made clean."¹ On the way, however, one of the lepers stops when he realizes that he had been healed. In that moment, he turns around and goes back to Jesus. As he returns, he begins praising God with every bit of breath in his lungs. When he arrives at Jesus' feet, he falls down before him in thanksgiving.

For years now, we have questioned why the other nine did not come back. In fact, in the church we speculate about what made them so ungrateful and often compare ourselves to them, especially when we call ourselves to a greater sense of gratitude at this time of year. Could it be that they were ungrateful? Could it be that they were so overjoyed that they just didn't remember? Could it be that they didn't even realize that they were clean until they got to the priest who confirmed it?

Without speculating on the circumstances of the other nine, I'm always curious as to what may have made one turn around. Then we read, "And he was a Samaritan." The enemy of the Jews of that day, it's notable to remember that the Samaritans were from the former northern kingdom. They were the first to fall away from God. Samaritans were trouble to the extent that they were the subject of jokes that God-fearing Jews told to one another. They were so despised that no one wanted to be near them. Touching a leper was one thing. Making contact with a Samaritan was almost as bad, perhaps even worse.

So not only was this man an unclean leper, he was a reviled Samaritan as well. He had no place among God's people. He was doubly cursed in the sight of anyone from the southern kingdom.

Twice scorned, an outcast among outcasts, the Samaritan leper was cleansed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. This man has much for which to be thankful. There was a lot of baggage lifted from him that caused him to turn around that day. Not only was he cleansed, but by a Jewish rabbi. He was not only restored to his community, but somehow Jesus restored his place among the community of the faithful as well.

Perhaps that's what made Sam's sacrifice at the 30 Hour Famine so memorable for me so many years ago. Sam's deep sense of gratitude, compassion, and the connection he felt to his church community moved him to do everything he could to make a difference in the lives of others. Those who shared the day with Sam knew how much he gave at the Famine that year.

As we gather around our Thanksgiving tables this week, I imagine most of us will have plenty of thanks to offer up. Yet, the real challenge awaits us as we rise up from the table. For then we must determine what we're going to do with it. What will we do with the thanksgiving we've spoken? How will we live out of a sense of gratitude so that we might not miss the focus of Thanksgiving?

In her book, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, Diana Butler-Bass writes, "Gratitude is...more than just an emotion. It is also a disposition that can be chosen and cultivated, an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions—it is an ethic. By 'ethic,' I mean a framework of principles by which we live more fully in the world. This ethic involves developing habits and practices of gratefulness that change us for the better. Gratitude involves not only what we feel, but also what we do."²

Gratitude is what moved one of ten healed lepers that day to turn around and return to the feet of the One who had forever transformed his life. That's not much of a return on investment for Jesus, is it? And yet, Jesus still reaches out and offers grace to each one. The one who returns is compelled to offer something more.

Gratitude moves us not only to give thanks, but to live out thanksgiving each day of our lives, offering up who we are and what we have received to the One who has forever transformed our lives. Giving back through missions, sharing time in the ministries of the Church, caring for our youngest disciples and nurturing them in the faith—these are ways that we live out our gratitude as we give thanks to God. May God help us not only to experience gratitude, but to live gratitude every moment of our days so that our world might be transformed in Christ.

¹ Luke 17:14b, NRSV.

² Bass, Diana Butler. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. New York: Harper One, 2018. 52.