

“Where Are the Other Nine?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 17: 11-19

What is it that we are doing when we write a thank you note? We’re responding to a generous act someone has shown to us. We’re putting into words how that act has made our lives better, perhaps more complete. And we are telling that individual that their kindness and graciousness has not gone unnoticed. One of the ways we as the church say “thank you” to individuals is when they make a donation in memory of someone. When a monetary gift is made, we acknowledge their generous act, we share how their gift will allow the church to do things it could not do previously, and we respond with gratitude to something we did not expect or deserve.

When we read this story of Jesus healing the ten lepers, one of the overarching themes is how to give thanks to God’s grace. In this story, 10 lepers approach Jesus, but do so while keeping their distance. When they call out to Jesus, he tells them to go show themselves to the priests, which was the common practice according to Jewish law. The difference this time is that as they were going to the temple, they are cured of their leprosy. Obviously, they were thrilled and excited, and nine of them continued on their way to show the priests.

But, as Paul Duke writes, “one of them drops back, stops, turns around. Something wilder than compliance comes into his mind. He is a new man, and that calls for a new voice. He runs back, ‘praising God with a loud voice,’ then falls at the feet of Jesus, pouring out the gladness of his thanks. It isn’t a tidy little thank-you speech but a stammering babble and a puddle of tears in the dust. It has been said that praise is ‘the jazz factor’ of faith. This man’s freedom has found its voice and is having its proper play at Jesus’ feet. Praise is improvising its answer to Love” (*“Down the Road and Back,” Paul Duke, Christian Century, September 27, 1995*).

Of course, the added layer of this example of thanks and praise is who this thanks-giver is. It’s almost an after-thought, a postscript to the tale. And yet it adds another completely rich and complex layer to the story. “Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan” (17:15-16). The outsider, “the foreigner” as Jesus calls him later, is the one who shows thanks. It’s not the faithful insider who follows all the laws and practices of the church.

Charles Cousar notes: *The original listeners and readers were no doubt jolted by this bit of information which undermines the stereotypes they held about Samaritans. Earlier in the narrative they may have been angered, but would not have been surprised by the rejection of Jesus by a Samaritan village*

(9:52-53). *But like the parable of the good Samaritan (10:30-37), the news that the grateful leper is a Samaritan occasions some rethinking. Even for us later readers, who are removed from the dynamics of the ancient racism, the point is reinforced by Jesus' reference to him as "this foreigner" (17:18). The model of faith turns out to be the ultimate outsider* (Charles Cousar, *Texts for Preaching, Year C*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 1994: 554-555).

How does it feel when the outsider shows more faith than the insider? How does it look when the newcomer to faith reflects more gratitude to God than the life-long believer? How does it sound when songs of praise are sung by the spiritual inexperienced, while the self-identified faithful keep walking away from the source of their healing and new life? How does it feel when the outsider shows more faith than the insider?

It is easy to place ourselves within the story's characters. Even though they are not specifically mentioned, maybe we are the disciples surrounding Jesus, wondering what all of this healing means. Maybe we are the Samaritan, giving thanks to God for grace and new life. Maybe we are the nine lepers who just kept walking. In fact, Jesus concludes by asking: "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Cousar continues: *We are made poignantly aware that not all who are helped by Jesus come to faith. Some take the help, perhaps, as a sign of what they deserve, a just recompense for their years of suffering. Others are perhaps too busy with the new possibilities for a restored life to engage in the unbounded response of the Samaritan. Whatever their reasons, the nine are impoverished by their lack of the joy of praising God, by their failure to discern the One from whom restoration has come. They become models (of a sort) of what faith is not* (*ibid*).

The image of the nine lepers who kept on walking after being healed really struck me, and I wouldn't say it was totally as an example of what not to do. For me, it's more an example of how things can be, and what we witness many times in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

I think of the family who experiences a sudden health crisis, and friends, family, and church members rally around their needs. Then they make it through, healing occurs, and their lives are restored where it was doubtful that normalcy would ever return. Yet the healing doesn't cause them to come to church more often, or witness about their faith in response to their gift. They simply fall back into what had been the norm, and keep on walking away.

I think of the family who experiences great sadness and trauma with the death of a loved one. The church surrounds them with compassion, does whatever it can to help, and they are embraced by God's love and comfort. But that healing through grief doesn't necessarily last forever, or become something which heals all wounds. Eventually the church becomes an obstacle to faith, and the family wanders down other roads. And, perhaps, the church realizes it is not the sole source of God's grace.

It saddens me when people don't respond to acts of grace with gratitude and renewal and joy. It is disappointing when words of commitment and promise turn instead into excuses and absence. It can be easy to fall into that mindset, only wishing others lived out their faith the way we want them to.

Perhaps that is when Jesus questions us, and we must answer our master. "When have you shown praise to God? How have you been an example to others? Does your life embody faith which knows its source of life and gives thanks every day? Is God only worshiped and praised in this church, or is God also praised and worshiped outside of these walls? You want others to turn around and worship beside you; so, when have you turned around and worshiped the one who gives you all that you need?"

We do not fall into one specific category in this healing narrative. We fall into all of the categories. We are the nine lepers who were healed and kept on walking, too busy to break out of our set ways to say, "thank you." We are the Samaritan who comes back, lays down, and in utter humility expresses gratitude when God has shown us mercy. We are the disciples, standing around and observing this strange play and wondering how we're supposed to use this event to teach, to care, to witness God's Word.

We are all of these characters, for we have all experienced healing by God's grace and responded in each of these ways. Ultimately, the question is not how we will respond to grace. The question is will we have the courage and the faith to believe that we can be healed? Will we have the trust that we cannot turn our lives around on our own? Will we believe that there is the One who will offer us grace, healing, and hope?

As we live today, tomorrow, and the remainder of our days, may we have faith to respond in gratitude to God's grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.