

“Living Thankful Lives”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Luke 17: 11-19**

One of my favorite movies is “Groundhog Day,” in which Bill Murray stars as a weather man, Phil Connors, who covers the groundhog, “Punxsutawney Phil,” on February 2. But, as those of you who have seen the movie know, Bill Murray’s character gets stuck in this day over and over again, and goes through a number of emotions as he tries to figure out how to get out of it. Even though the movie was made in 1993, it still strikes a cord with me every time I see it.

In the beginning of the movie, Bill Murray’s character is pretty self-absorbed, thinking primarily of himself and not caring much about others. Eventually, after going through so many repetitions of the same day, his attitude starts to change. In one of the most poignant scenes of the movie, Phil comes across an elderly, homeless man who is struggling for life. He takes him to the hospital, and although the man dies, in the next “day” Phil is feeding him a hearty meal at the diner, and then is seen in the same alley trying to resuscitate this homeless man. Throughout the movie, and especially in this scene, is the story of a man who goes from thinking so much of himself to beginning to focus on the needs of others. In the end, it is this unexpected change in his character that allows him to wake up to February 3<sup>rd</sup>, instead of being trapped in Groundhog Day.

Throughout the gospel narrative, there is a common theme of the unexpected happening to show the depth of God’s love. It could be through a miracle story, such as the feeding of the five thousand. It could be by playing on people’s perceptions and reversing them, such as when Jesus welcomes Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector. It seems to me that the message God continually is trying to communicate is: expect the unexpected.

That theme doesn’t change in Luke, nor does it change for the passage of Scripture we have read today. It involves one of the most revolting diseases of biblical times, and how that is used for good in God’s name. It involves a Samaritan showing the faith that others could not show or act out. And it involves an unexpected ending which leaves everyone wondering: what does it truly mean to live thankful lives?

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.

Debie Thomas is a writer, and her parents are originally from India. She describes how, when she was a child, they took a family trip back to India. While on that trip, they were in a train station, and while waiting to buy tickets, she noticed two individuals off in the corner. She comments that she had become accustomed to seeing beggars and people who were blind or lame.

“But,” she says, “these two figures were different. Though I guessed they needed help, too, I didn’t want to approach them. Their faces were distorted, eaten. Their fingers were half-missing, and their feet were scary, mottled stumps. ‘They’re sick,’ my father answered after a quick, pitying glance in their direction. ‘They have leprosy.’

“The train station was crowded that day, swarming with travelers, vendors, and beggars. But what struck me about those two figures huddling in the shadows was how alone they were. It was other-worldly, profound and impenetrable in a way I could barely comprehend. It was as if some invisible barrier, solid as granite, separated them from the rest of humanity, rendering them wholly untouchable. Yes, their disease frightened me. But what frightened me much more was their isolation, their not-belonging.

“The lepers in the Gospel story also live in the shadows – in a no-man’s-land. They are required to live in seclusion, keep their distance from passersby . . . So when Jesus heals their leprosy he does not merely cure their bodies; he restores their identities. He enables their return to all that makes us fully human – family, community, society,

intimacy. In healing their withered skin and numbed limbs, he releases them to feel again – to embrace and to be embraced, to worship in community, to reclaim all the social and spiritual ties their disease stole from them. Jesus enters a no-man’s-land – a land of no belonging – and hands out ten (restored identities). He invites ten exiles home” (Debie

Thomas, *Living By the Word*, *Christian Century*, September 28, 2016: 20).

Here’s the thing: this story may be about an awful disease, but the reality is that ALL of us have been isolated and felt unclean, pressed to the margins in some way or another. It could be an illness or disease, but instead of an outwardly physical ailment, it is mental or emotional illness that torments us under the surface. It could be the stress of our workplace and the pressure we feel to provide for our household, even when we are unhappy, and those stresses lead to unhealthy, even addictive behavior. It could be loneliness we feel as a caregiver for a loved one, with never a moment of rest. It could be the unsettledness we feel in our family relationships, or the pain we know from broken friendships in the past. In some way or another, we are the ten lepers. We are the unclean. We are the ones who have been isolated and left in the corner of the train station.

And we are the ones who are restored to wholeness by God’s grace in Jesus Christ. We are told by him that we belong. We are told by him that we are valued and treasured and made well through God’s love. We are told by him that nothing in life or in death can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. Nothing! That is the promise of salvation. That is the good news that should cause us to leap and dance and give praise to God as we go on our way to the temple.

But then there is the one. There is the one who stops, turns around, and comes back to the source of his new identity. He lays himself down at the feet of Emmanuel, God-with-us, and gives thanks. The Samaritan – the outsider-squared – is the one who recognizes the source of his well-being and wholeness, and shows the world what it means to live a thankful life.

The thing I love about “Groundhog Day” is that Bill Murray’s character keeps getting second-chances. He keeps getting the opportunity to figure it out. While at the time it is torture for him to be reliving the same day over and over and over, he eventually realizes that he is able to let go of the behaviors that were unhealthy, and grab hold of the approach to life that will secure wholeness and fulfillment. And he is grateful for that gift.

What would you do if you were given the opportunity to relive a day, and chose to do things differently? Would you see yourself through a self-centered lens, realizing you thought too-often of what pleased you the most? In your interactions with others, would you recognize those moments you wished you had been grateful for their kind word, their helping hand, and on a second-time through, you spoke

those words of thanks? In seeing the breadth of your life, would you see those moments when you felt isolated, alone, and broken, and then where God moved in a particular way to heal, welcome, and restore you to wholeness?

Living a thankful life is not easy. We cannot go back in time and relive our life the way Bill Murray did in "Groundhog Day." But we can learn from what we have experienced in the past in order to live today in gratitude to God for this life of grace we have been given.

Each of you have been given some post-it notes with you bulletins this morning. I would challenge you to take those this week, write the words "Thank You" on them, and then place them in locations that correlate to areas of your life that you are especially grateful to God. It could be something as simple as on your car dashboard, reminding you every day that you are grateful for the ability to have transportation when you need it. It could be by a picture of your family or someone special, reminding you everyday that you are grateful that God put them in your life. It could be by anything that represents your desire to live a thankful life.

And perhaps, in doing something tangible like this, we begin to walk - no run - back to the source of our restored identity as children of God, and say, "Thank you, Lord, for all you have done for me."

Thanks be to God. Amen.