

Proper 22-C, 10-13-2019
Shepherd by the Sea Episcopal/Lutheran Mission
Pastor Paul Theiss
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Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Thank you for your generous hospitality. Nancy and I are enjoying our weekend in Gualala. Yesterday we paddled our kayak up the river through the redwoods, and saw a whale swimming by from the parking lot of our motel. What a blessing. Thanks.

Speaking about giving thanks, that's the theme of our Gospel today. Ten lepers were healed by the grace of God. One came back and gave thanks. Jesus told him, "Your faith has made you well."

Today's Gospel invites us to a life of thanksgiving, to live, as the Twelve Step programs say, with an "Attitude of gratitude."

One of the things I'm thankful for is chocolate. What a gift. Even its botanical name says it: Theobroma, food of the gods. This time of year, heading towards Halloween, kids are looking forward to o.d.'ing on chocolate.

When I was younger my favorite was Hershey's squares, the kind you put into s'mores around a campfire. Then as I grew older I was introduced to bittersweet chocolate. Now after all these years I'm a fan of those 60% cacao bars.

But something strange happened to my taste buds along the way: for me, Hershey's squares became passe'. They aren't as wonderful as they used to be. I guess I've gotten pickier.

That says something about thanksgiving. When we first experience a good thing, it's a real wow. The second time, not so spectacular. And after a few repetitions, the gift isn't really a gift anymore. It's more like what we take for granted.

Maybe that was going on among the nine lepers. They were Israelites, good people. Then they'd gotten a dread disease which had caused them to be separated and shunned, even by their loved ones. A really tough break. But when Jesus healed them, things started back toward normal. All they had to do was show the priests, who were the public health officers, that they were cured, and then they could be re-integrated into society. Why

double back to thank Jesus? He was doing his job as a healer, and they wanted to resume their former lives. These days, when a highway gets fixed, do we write a note to Caltrans?

The one who gave thanks was a Samaritan. What was it that brought him back to Jesus? When he was certified as clean he'd still be a Samaritan. As part of a minority group, he was used to dealing with discrimination. Maybe having that extra difficulty to deal with made him more sensitive to life's daily insults, and to life's gifts. Maybe he didn't take blessings so much for granted.

Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well." Another way to translate that from the original New Testament would be to say, "Your faith has saved you." In Greek it's the same word: saved and made well.

His faith, faith in a loving, generous, and healing God, saved him to find God's gift in every day. His faith made him well, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. He chose to have an attitude of gratitude: not to take healing as his due, but as grace, undeserved and free.

All of us have our problems. Each one of us has our pains and our setbacks, our moments of despair and fear. If we didn't, we wouldn't be here this morning, to be made well by Jesus.

Jesus not only gives us healing: he gives us faith. Faith in Jesus opens our eyes to see the gifts of God around us, the gifts given to us every day. Our faith is an attitude of gratitude, and it's a healing attitude.

No matter how well we are doing or how poorly, we need that gift. And with that gift, we are blessed, regardless of our external circumstances.

Let me tell you about two women I once knew. One, Juana, was living in a one room shack in Mexico with her alcoholic husband. To get drinking water she had to climb down a steep hill and back up again hauling that heavy jug. But she was grateful for God's blessings. In her younger life she'd picked cotton and chopped sugar cane under the tropical sun in the southern state of Chiapas. Now she was raising two granddaughters who were actually getting an education. Their mother, laboring in the fields hundreds of miles away, sent money home for all of them. And wonder of wonders, a carload of gringos, our church group, dropped in to build her another room, doubling her living space. Juana thanked God for her blessings.

Another woman I knew was much younger and had been given a good education in San Francisco. She lived in a spacious house with an ocean view. Unfortunately she'd gotten hooked on hard drugs and wouldn't listen to her mom's advice to get treatment. She could handle it all by herself. One evening I walked up the hill to visit her. It was one of those amazingly clear fall days on the coast. You could see the Point Reyes light, fifty miles away across the Gulf of the Farallones. She came out to meet me on the front porch and I remarked on the beautiful view before us. Her clouded eyes rested briefly on the ocean and she said, "Oh, I never looked out there before."

Two women. Two very different standards of living. But what separated them wasn't geography or language or income. It was their attitude toward life. Their faith, if you will.

God gives gifts to each of us. Not only Theobroma, but multitudes of good things. Can we see them? Or have we received so much, in such abundance, that our senses have become dulled? Maybe we're not addicted to heroin, but we can be taking God's gifts for granted.

We don't have to wait until good things are taken away to notice them. Every day, whether it's good or bad, can be a day to rejoice and be glad.

Being thankful for God's blessings does not mean making light of difficulties. It does not mean blaming people when they suffer and complain. Jesus did not thank his heavenly Father for his suffering. He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." We have a right to our feelings, and those feelings may include grief and anger and feeling ripped off.

But how we deal with those negative feelings is up to us. Do we let our troubles dominate our life and sap our strength? Or can we, in faith, focus also on the good things and gain strength from God's gifts?

Five years ago I Nancy and I were looking forward to a peaceful retirement when I was diagnosed with advanced multiple myeloma, a cancer of the blood and bone marrow for which there is no cure. The cancer stripped the calcium from my spine and chest, which collapsed in excruciating pain. I couldn't move my hands up to shave my face. Nancy heroically battled the cancer right alongside me, but for months the treatments made little headway. Each night we came together in prayer, and Nancy's suggestion was to find something to be thankful for in the day which had just passed. And you know, there always was. A few minute's sleep. Pain pills. A good meal. Caring friends. Dedicated doctors and nurses. A loving family. A supportive church. A funny program on TV. We never ran out of things to thank God for.

We also had our moments of despair. We were not always courageous. The negatives often outweighed the positives. Please don't tell me that God gave me cancer to strengthen my faith. God doesn't wish calamity on anyone. What kind of God would do that?

Here's another thing. God didn't bless us because we were thankful. Remember, Jesus healed all ten lepers, the one who thanked him and the nine who didn't. Jesus loves everybody.

But giving thanks helped us see the hand of God in everything, positive and negative. We were never alone, because Jesus was always there with healing love, suffering this evil with us and for us. And he who died and rose again is there to see each of us through to a better day, whether in this world or the next. I didn't know if I'd die then or not, but I knew that no matter what, it would be okay. Like the Scripture says, "Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord," Romans 14.

Now it's five years later and I'm in remission and we're spending a weekend in Gualala. God is good. All the time.

Thanksgiving opens our eyes of faith to the goodness of God. Our faith, which is itself a gift of God, makes us whole, makes us well, saves us.

So my suggestion is, if we aren't already doing this, give thanks for something every day. Let's make sure that our daily prayers include thanksgiving. And the more blessings we'll give thanks for, the more we'll see. Amen.

