

Pastor Madelynne Lindsey
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Where are the Other Nine? Luke 17:11-19

Let us pray: Lord, we ask you that these words from my mouth may speak to us today. Open our ears, open our minds, and open our hearts so we may hear your will for our lives, and that your name may be praised. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Quite a few years ago, the United Methodist Church I attended in Montclair had the opportunity to give out government issued cheese. I volunteered to hand out the block of cheese to individuals who came to the church.

I really felt good handing out that cheese until I left the church and saw some of those people selling the cheese on the main avenue. I thought how ungrateful they were.

But then one Sunday a woman came to church and thanked me for giving her the cheese. She said she was able to feed her five children as a result of getting that block of cheese. She was thankful.

In today gospel reading, Luke picks up the journey of Jesus proceeding toward Jerusalem where He will meet with His appointed destiny. He is traveling somewhere along the border between Samaria and Galilee, where He enters a village and encounters ten leprous men.

According to the Law, they keep their distance, but they recognize Jesus and cry out to Him for mercy. These ten men have the worst disease of their day. The physical ramifications are horrendous. Leprosy attacks the body, leaving sores, missing fingers, missing toes, damaged limbs.

This disease must have been bad in the days of Christ. It wasn't just the grotesque damage, or the sight of someone with leprosy. It wasn't just the loud cries, it was also the smell of rotting, decaying flesh.

The emotional pain of a leper, however, must have been even worse than the physical pain. These ten men were removed from their families, from their community. There could be no contact, whatsoever, with their children or grandchildren. None.

Immediately removed. Their wives would not be allowed to kiss them goodbye for fear that she, too, would become afflicted. What would it have been like to have been removed from friends and family for a lifetime, and to have been forced to announce that removal on a daily basis?

It must have been horrible. Among other things, leprosy attacked

the vocal cords, so that these men probably could only make a raspy sound. But that didn't stop them from raising their voices and crying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

The gracious Lord Jesus will never turn a deaf ear to a cry like that! And yet, in this account, ten men encounter Jesus, and hear him say the most unusual thing. "We want to be well!" they scream at Jesus. And the great teacher responds, "Go and show yourselves to the priest."

The local priest had duties other than leading worship on each Sabbath. He was also something of a health official. If a person was miraculously healed of leprosy, it was up to the priest to inspect the body, to test for a complete removal of the disease, and to announce the person healed.

In such cases, the person would have been cleansed, and at that point, it would be fine for the leper to see his wife again, to hold his daughter again, to look for work again. If the priest gave him the OK, he would be healed!

So, they headed off in search of the priests. And on their way, they were healed. On their way, a hand reappeared, and tingled with life. A crutch wrapped with a filthy rag fell to the ground. The leg was back, healthy, whole, complete.

The skin cleared, and the tiny hairs on a forearm turned from snow white to brown. One looked at the other, another looked at the rest, and the screaming started. The smiles broke into cheering, and a sweet madness. They raced off in the distance, not believing that the nightmare was finally over.

But for the miracle to happen, these men had to start walking in faith before their circumstances had changed one tiny bit. Is there a more potent lesson for us? You cannot wait until the problems are over to start walking in faith.

You cannot put conditions on God. You cannot say, "Lord, as soon as there's enough money, I will follow your instructions." You cannot pray, "Lord, if you'll just solve this issue in my family, I'll start going to church." You cannot put conditions on God!

Instead, God places a demand for faith on us, before anything at all has changed. God might say, "Love me despite the disease. Obey me despite the lack of talent, or the lack of resources. Follow me now, despite the depression.

Say no to the temptation, while it still is difficult. Praise me in the darkest of nights, and in the worst of circumstances." This is the nature of God, a God who loves you so much, He'll give you the opportunity to be thankful when nothing about your circumstances gives you that motivation.

My friends, that is the very definition of faith. If you praised God only on the good days, only in the best of circumstances, it would not be faith at all.

That would be more like a business arrangement - and this is not about business! Some of you may be facing some difficult circumstances, right now. And what awaits you today, this week, is the question, will you be thankful despite the difficult circumstances? If so, you will have experienced faith.

While on a short-term mission trip in 1996, Pastor Jack Hinton from New Bern, North Carolina, was leading worship at a leper colony on the island of Tabango. There was time before one more song, so he asked if anyone had a request. A woman who had been facing away from the pulpit turned around.

"It was the most hideous face I had ever seen," Hinton said. "The woman's nose and ears were entirely gone. The disease had destroyed her lips as well. She lifted a fingerless hand in the air and asked, 'Can we sing Count Your Many Blessings?'"

Overcome with emotion, Hinton left the service. He was followed by a team member who said, "Jack, I guess you'll never be able to sing that song again." "Yes, I will," Jack replied, "but I'll never sing it the same way. Be thankful in the work of God's goodness.

One of the men came back to Jesus and praised God. I believe that only the man who returned to give thanks to Jesus was saved spiritually. He was thankful. He was public about it. He was loud - he wasn't shy at all.

Why was he so loud? This guy had been forced to yell for as long as he'd had leprosy. It might have been years. He'd probably yelled so long, he didn't know how to come to the Lord quietly, or even in a normal voice. When he came back and fell at the feet of Jesus, he was louder than the normal person, and he was praising God.

This one man caught himself during the celebration and returned to Jesus. He reversed his steps, put his family on hold, put the priest on hold. His thankfulness led to action. And boy, did that turn out to be important!

Note that this leper's praise was heartfelt: He glorified God "with a loud voice" (17:15). If before his voice had been hampered by leprosy, it was freed up now and he exercised it with full force! Others may have been embarrassed by his exuberance, but he didn't care!

Jesus had healed him, and he was going to make it known! This leper's glad praise should be that of every person whose heart has been healed by Jesus' mighty power. **Glorify* God-Twice it is mentioned that the man glorified God (17:15, 18). To glorify God is to extol His

attributes and His actions. It is to exalt Him, to let others know how great He is.

. . But, "Where are the other nine?" "Were not ten made clean?" Jesus asked. Do you realize what this says? Jesus never commanded that any of them express thankfulness to God, or return to him, the healer. Nevertheless, that is what Jesus expected. But, why did the Samaritan return?

Part of the answer may be found in the identity of this healed man. He was a leper like the other nine. But alone among the 10, he was a Samaritan. As such, he was twice scorned, twice rejected, twice removed from the community.

As a leper, he was unclean ritually and, therefore, to be isolated, an object, no doubt, of revulsion and fear on the part of his neighbors. And as a Samaritan he would have been an outsider-and a despised one to the more orthodox Jews of Galilee. Perhaps this Samaritan leper suffered more and thus his healing suggested a more profound gratitude.

The fact is we don't know why he came back but, boundaries expand to include even those the world defined as unclean, foreign, or impure. Luke seems to be telling us a story about a daring boundary crossing, daring both on the part of Jesus but also on the part of the Samaritan.

Jesus rejoiced over 'this Samaritan,' and gave him a greater gift than he had received when the leprosy was cleared from his flesh. Jesus said, at the end, to the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Luke, I suspect, knew that the healing came from God and not from the Samaritan's belief, but he also knew that to be truly well requires the embrace of heartfelt gratitude with the grace of Christ's daring love. Clearly, Jesus was pleased with his expression of thanks and grieved at the absence of the other nine (17:17-18)

Thirteen years before his conversion, John Wesley had a conversation late one night with the porter of his college that deeply impressed him and convinced him that there was more to Christianity than he had found.

Wesley discovered that the man had only one coat and that nothing had passed his lips that day, except a drink of water, and yet his heart was full of gratitude to God.

Wesley said, "You thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat, and no bed to lie upon. What else do you thank him for?" "I thank him," answered the porter, "that He has given me my life and being, and a heart to love Him, and a desire to serve Him.

Let's all learn from this exuberant and thankful leper how to respond to God's blessings, especially to the blessing of salvation. We should join him in glorifying God at the feet of Jesus with thankful hearts.

What kind of action is Jesus looking for from you? Has God's Holy Spirit been urging you toward some action step? Had the Lord been tugging at you for some step of faith? Is there a family, a friend, or even a stranger in need of help?

I know what a Scout would do. A thankful scout sees the blessings of good things - food, family, friends, freedom, and even fun. A scout has opportunities for adventure and excitement that many other youths do not get. A thankful scout understands that the world does not owe anything.

Then, what should a thankful scout do? Saying that I'm thankful doesn't count for much, just by saying I'm trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, ... doesn't mean much. A scout must DO something to show that he/she is really that way. That is what living the Scout Law means in everyday life.

My best advice, based on what Jesus was looking for 2,000 years ago, is to take that step of action. Are you one of the nine? Or are you the one that came back to thank Jesus? Amen.

Let us pray: Teach us to practice gratitude in our lives that we may honor the graciousness. Forgive every form of self-centeredness that assumes we are entitled to what we have and make us mindful of every good gift and of every good gift-giver. Let us experience the joy of your presence that makes us well. Amen.