

REMEMBER

Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving Day

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The story of one leper out of ten thanking Jesus for healing is well-known. What may not be as well-known is the intent behind telling the story. It was actually meant to be a bit of barb to Jesus' fellow Jews. The punch line in the story is not exactly that only one out of ten said thank you, but that the one who did was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Why was this foreigner the only one who came back to thank God?" The expectation was that God's chosen ones would be the ones to both recognize the work of God in their lives and be thankful. Samaritans, though kissing cousins living between Galilee and Judah, were thought to be foreigners, unbelieving and unclean people, and not to be associated with. And yet, it was the one Samaritan, and not the nine Jews, who thought to thank God for a miraculous healing. This would be rather like a group of Christians and one atheist having lunch and only the atheist saying grace. In many ways, it is the same point Jesus made when he answered the question, "who is my neighbor?" by telling a story in which the one who showed care and compassion, acting as neighbor, was a Samaritan, and not the respected religious leaders. Bear in mind that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he would be rejected when this experience occurred, and you can see this story as a precursor of who would and who would not embrace the Lord, and in each case, it was the unexpected. That is the bigger message of this lesson.

Still, on a day of thanksgiving, it raises the question: what would keep anyone, Jew, Samaritan, or Gentile, from saying thank you to God? Saying thank you is not dependent on race, ethnicity, culture, or religious heritage. It is universal.

This is especially true when we receive an incredible gift, which the lepers did. I mean, their lives had been devastated. Leprosy could be terribly disfiguring, even fatal. It was also isolating, for at that time lepers were banned from the community, forced to live on the outskirts of town, quarantined. They were not allowed to approach anyone, and if anyone passed by, they had to cover their faces and identify themselves as lepers, lest someone come too near. Notice in the story that the lepers did not come running up to Jesus to ask for help but rather called from a distance. Oh, it was possible that the leprosy could run its course, and these isolated ones could return to their communities. But it was also possible that it could be a permanent condition. So, when they begged Jesus for mercy, and he heard them and healed them, well, that was big. That was literally a gift of life, a gift of a lifetime. It is hard to imagine only one saying thank you. Why would anyone fail to give thanks?

Actually, for many reasons. One is simply that some people are just rude. They never thank anyone for anything. They never speak a word, send an email, make a call, or send a note. They receive without gratefulness. Fortunately, that is a minority. There are other reasons for thanklessness, though.

Sometimes we just forget. How can you forget being healed from leprosy? Well, Jesus told the lepers to go see the priests. This is because it was the priests' job to determine if the leprosy was gone or not and to give permission for the person to re-enter the community. Maybe they did not know or believe they were healed until the priests confirmed it. What, then, would be the natural reaction? I would think running straight home, or into the village, or to seek out friends from whom they had been separated. They would be excited, joyful, thrilled and want to share their good news. By the time they remembered Jesus, if they remembered Jesus, he was gone. It is not just the lepers. It is easy to get caught up in life and forget to say thank you to each other or to God.

Sometimes we receive a gift but it is not all which we had hoped for and so our thankfulness is muted. The joke is told about a mother at the beach who saw her son pulled out into the ocean by the current. He was not a good swimmer and clearly was in extreme danger. Immediately she prayed, "O dear God, please save my son." Just as it looked as if he would go under for good, a large wave picked him up and deposited him on the beach. The mother ran to him and embraced him, repeating over and over, "you are saved." Suddenly she stopped and stepped back and looked at him with some consternation, then looked up to the heavens and said, "He had a hat." When we do not receive everything for which we hoped, we may fail to say thank you for what we have received.

Sometimes we forget the gift itself. The young star athlete being paid millions of dollars and being showered with daily accolades may forget the parent who drove him or her to practice at all hours of the day and on weekends, day in and day out, or the coach who instilled the fundamentals, or the one who gave the natural ability, God. The proud college graduate may forget that parent who worked a second job to pay for the tuition, or the advisor who gave good advice, or the professor who spent extra time helping, or the anonymous donor who gave the money for a scholarship. We could come up with hundreds of similar scenarios.

This is to say that there is a tendency to believe we are where we are and have what we have because of our work, our efforts, our skill, and our doing, failing to recognize how many gifts we receive from others and from God along the way. I can say with all honesty that I have worked hard and been diligent and achieved a number of things in my life. I am unashamedly proud of that. In my pride, though, it is easy to forget, or even never be aware of the fact that I could have worked just as hard or harder, and be living in extreme poverty today simply because I was born into poverty in a different

country with no chance of changing that reality. I was born into a stable family with parents who loved me and guided me. That was not my doing. I have been blessed with a lifetime of good health. Again, not my doing. Because of the privileges I have had, I have never missed a meal, not had a roof over my head, or not had medical care. Partly because of my work, but not completely, I was able to go to college, go to seminary, go to a doctoral program. There have been so many things over which I have had no control, opportunities literally not available to most people in the world, and so many people who have helped me along the way, some of whom I do not even know. I cannot account for all I have received. Ah, but in thinking of what I have accomplished, it would be so easy to be oblivious to much of this, to be unaware of what has been given, and thus, to fail to say thank you. I am an example, not an exception.

This is the exact point Moses was trying to make in our lesson from Deuteronomy. The Israelites, after wandering in the wilderness for forty years, were about to enter into the Promised Land. Moses would not be going with them. He wanted them to settle and prosper, and he was confident they would. But this was his worry. He worried that when their houses were built, and their fields were planted and growing, and their livestock was producing, and life was good, they would forget that once they were slaves in Egypt and God had led them out. He had kept them alive in the wilderness and had given them the land on which they were settled. He worried that they would think they were prospering because of their work, their efforts, and their skill, and would not only forget to thank God, but actually forget about God all together. He said, "When you become successful, don't say, 'I'm rich, and I've earned it myself.' Instead, remember that the Lord your God gives you the strength to make a living."

Who could or would forget all that we may think? We might be surprised. Moses was onto something. Sociological studies suggest that the more we have, the less thankful we are. In other words, thankfulness does not necessarily grow with our blessings but may actually diminish. That might seem counterintuitive. The reason is because the more we have, the more we believe that we control our lives, that we make things happen, and think our blessings are because of us. Conversely, when we are in a place in life where we know we need others and need God, we are aware of what we receive and are especially thankful.

This is why I think a day such as this is especially important. It does more than just call us to be thankful. It causes us to reflect on just why we are thankful. It triggers our memories. It brings to mind the people who have made a positive difference in our lives. It reminds us that so much is possible because we live in a democracy and a land of opportunity. It challenges us to stop taking for granted the daily blessings of food and shelter, because there are many in the world who can never take these things for granted.

Mostly, it forces us to remember that everything we consider a blessing is because of God. We are not the masters of the universe. We are the recipients of the gifts of God.

Remember, Moses said. Remember. Memory is a big part of thanksgiving. How quickly nine out of ten lepers forgot that the one from whom they had begged for mercy had been merciful and restored their very lives. Lest we judge them, let's be alert to how quickly we can forget all that God has done and is doing for us. We are all the recipients of countless gifts from God. Don't forget to say thank you, and not just today, but every day. Thank God, for your life, your possessions, your relationships, and your very salvation. Remember. Remember.

All thanks and praise be to God.

Amen.