

Christina Litwiller
Salina Mennonite Church
May 24, 2020

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19; Colossians 3:14-17; Philippians 4:4-7

Giving Thanks

Once upon a time there were ten very sad men.¹ They were sad because they weren't allowed to live with their families. They couldn't talk to the people they loved. They couldn't even be seen in the neighborhood. They were forced to live outside of the city. They were under quarantine because of a skin disease known as leprosy.

Leprosy is a terrible disease where you get sores all over your body. Many people who have it lose their fingers, toes, and even their eyesight. Leprosy is very contagious. So if you got it, you were immediately kicked out of town.

Of the ten men with leprosy, nine were from Jerusalem and one was from Samaria. The Jewish people from Jerusalem didn't like the Samaritans. They thought that people from Samaria were no good. All ten of the men were sad. But the one from Samaria was especially sad and lonely.

One day the men got some exciting news. They heard that Jesus from Nazareth was passing through their town on his way to Jerusalem. Everybody knew about Jesus, whether they lived inside the city or out in the wilderness. Jesus was a miracle worker. Some said he was sent by God.

The nine sad, sick Jewish men ran to the edge of town and waited for Jesus. The one sad, sick Samaritan followed behind and waited too. Finally they heard a crowd in the distance. Jesus was coming!

Just as Jesus was passing through the city, the nine Jews shouted as loud as they could, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" The Samaritan shouted too.

Jesus stopped walking and turned towards the men who were far off in the distance. And all the men with leprosy shouted again, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Jesus cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted back, "Go show yourself to the priests." Then Jesus walked away. The crowd quickly followed after him.

The men looked at each other and saw they all still had the terrible disease. They knew that they could never enter the city unless the priest saw that their disease was gone. As they wondered what to do, the one from Samaria ran off toward the temple. The other nine quickly ran off as well. And that's when the miracle happened!

As the men were running to the temple to show themselves to the priest, their leprosy was completely cured! When they realized what happened, they jumped up and down for joy and continued running towards the temple.

However, one man, the one from Samaria, stopped and turned around. He began running as fast as he could back towards Jesus. When he caught up with him he fell to the ground in front of him and said, "Praise God, I am healed!" Then he couldn't stop thanking Jesus. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

That's when Jesus asked the people around him a question. "Didn't all ten receive the same healing this fellow did? Where are the other nine? Was the only one who came back to give God praise an outsider?"

¹ Story adapted Luke 17:11-19, *The Voice*, and from Bibletoons Ten Lepers by Dan Huffman, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyQvXEgUKUg>

Then Jesus spoke to the Samaritan man, “Get up, and go on your way. Your faith has made you healthy again.”

Usually, when I hear this story, I don’t think too much about the nine men who didn’t return, other than to be critical of their apparent lack of gratitude.² But this time I’ve spent some time wondering about them. Were they actually ungrateful? I doubt it.

Maybe they were hesitant to return to the community that had cast them out. They’d lived in isolation for a long time. Maybe they were remembering family members who had already died because of the illness. Maybe they wanted their re-entry to go a bit slower. Maybe they needed to brush up on their social skills

Or I wonder if they were so focused on getting back to life as usual that it hadn’t crossed their minds yet to seek out Jesus and thank him. Perhaps they thought the most important action was to go to the temple, show themselves to the priest, and give thanks there. In fact, that’s what Jesus had told them to do. Maybe after that, it would dawn on them to stop and think about God’s healing action through this person, Jesus.

All of them were healed, and they remained healed of the skin disease. But to the Samaritan who turned back Jesus said, “Your faith has made you well.” This man received more than physical healing. This story of healing turned into a story of an outsider who was welcomed into God’s plan of salvation. The man from Samaria came to understand that because he took the time to stop and say thank you.

Gratitude, giving thanks, is the spiritual practice we’re focusing on this morning. It’s likely we relate to this biblical story in a different way than we have before. We’re used to thinking about contagious disease, isolation, and quarantine. We’re living during a time when we’re not always sure what to be grateful for. We don’t give thanks for the suffering, death, job loss, isolation, violence, and other hardships and tragedies this pandemic brings. We mourn the unequal distribution of suffering across economic and racial lines. We mourn the widening of gaps between people of differing ideas and cultures.

But we can give thanks for the time and space this has created in our lives. We give thanks for the shalom we’ve witnessed, the healing of relationships with God, self, others, and the earth that have occurred. We give thanks for the times, however rare they may be, when we witness outsiders being welcomed in.

A posture of gratitude, an attitude of gratitude, orients us toward Jesus and the transformation he works in our lives. We practice gratitude as much as we can at all times and in all situations. Practicing gratitude is as simple as taking a minute or two each day to name something you’re thankful for. You might choose to write these things down in a notebook, a gratitude journal. Some people write them on a piece of paper and put them in a jar, a gratitude jar. On a day when you can’t think of anything for which to give thanks, you can look back in your notebook or pull a paper out of your jar. Remembering the past can help us in the present.

Giving thanks during the good times equips us and builds us up so we can endure the difficult times. Our prayers need to include “thank you” along with “forgive me” and “help me.”

Two passages from the New Testament letters are helpful in learning how gratitude fits with other practices in following God’s ways, of living as God wants us to live. The first is in Colossians.³

² This sermon draws from Week 2 Worship Resources written by Alissa Bender, *Leader, Summer 2018*, Vol. 15, No. 4, ©2018 MennoMedia p. 43.

³ Colossians 3:12-17, *The Voice*.

Since you are all set apart by God, made holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a holy way of life: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Put up with one another. Forgive. Pardon any offenses against one another, as the Lord has pardoned you, because you should act in kind. But above all these, put on love! Love is the perfect tie to bind these together. Let your hearts fall under the rule of the Anointed's peace (the peace you were called to as one body), and be thankful.

Let the word of the Anointed One richly inhabit your lives. With all wisdom teach, counsel, and instruct one another. Sing the psalms, compose hymns and songs inspired by the Spirit, and keep on singing—sing to God from hearts full and spilling over with thankfulness. Surely, no matter what you are doing (speaking, writing, or working), do it all in the name of Jesus our Master, sending thanks through Him to God our Father.

The other passage is from Philippians.⁴

Most of all, friends, always rejoice in the Lord! I never tire of saying it: Rejoice! Keep your gentle nature so that all people will know what it looks like to walk in His footsteps. The Lord is ever present with us. Don't be anxious about things; instead, pray. Pray about everything. God longs to hear your requests, so talk to God about your needs and be thankful for what has come. And know that the peace of God (a peace that is beyond any and all of our human understanding) will stand watch over your hearts and minds in Jesus, the Anointed One.

Quoting a few lines from the story we read a bit earlier:⁵

The poet is thankful for words that rhyme.
The children, for morning story time.
The doctor is thankful when patients get well.
The traveler, for a cozy hotel.
The birder is thankful to list a new bird.
The pastor is thankful for God's loving word.
The crafter is thankful for glitter and glue.
And me? I'm ever, so thankful...for you!

I am thankful for you, my community of faith. I'm thankful for the presence of God's spirit with us across the internet and through the mail. I'm thankful for God's loving word. And I'm thankful for God's living word, Jesus, who brings healing to body, mind, and spirit, and welcomes the outsider.

Thanks be to God!

⁴ Philippians 4:4-7, *The Voice*.

⁵ Eileen Spinelli, *Thankful*, Zonderkidz, 2015