

Saying Thanks

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19; Colossians 3:14-17

Faith Link: We can give thanks to God.¹

The story of ten men with leprosy is one of seven quest stories in Luke. The quest stories follow a similar pattern. Someone approaches Jesus with a physical, social, or spiritual need. It's always vital, frequently urgent, and often complex. In these stories there are obstacles; something or someone stands between the seeker and the fulfillment of their quest.

All the quests are fulfilled to some degree. Jesus heals a man from his paralysis after his friends cut a hole in the roof of a house. Jesus heals the slave of a centurion, an outsider, from a distance, without even going to his home. A woman of ill repute dares to enter a home uninvited. She bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with oil. Jesus forgives her and restores her relationship with the community. Jesus tells a rich ruler what he must do to enter the kingdom of God. We don't know if he followed Jesus' advice to sell what he has and give it to the poor. Zacchaeus climbs a tree to see Jesus. After a meal together, he makes restitution for his fraudulent practices. Jesus promises one of the criminals who is being crucified with him that they will be together in Paradise.

And then there are the people with leprosy in today's story. One of the main obstacles on their quest is physical distance. People with leprosy had to stay about 50 ft away from healthy people to avoid contamination. This made normal relationships difficult and intimate conversations impossible. But they overcome this by shouting to attract Jesus' attention. "Have mercy on us, Master Jesus!" they say.

We don't know for sure whether they want healing or money, although there are a few clues in the text that lean toward healing. They call Jesus "Master," so they seem to know something about Jesus and about what he can do. Jesus does not, however, heal them on the spot. In fact, Jesus puts up another obstacle: he tells them to go show themselves to the priests to make their restoration official. These people must participate in their own healing by being obedient to Jesus and to the law. As they turn and begin to walk away, they are healed. Their quest is complete. Or is it?

One of the questions this story raises is how easily and frequently people may settle for only a morsel of the abundant grace that God offers. Like the nine, they might sometimes cut the quest short. A Samaritan, a foreigner, the one least expected to come back, isn't merely satisfied to be healed. He wants something more. When he realizes that he has been healed, he's filled with gratitude. This overflowing gratitude sends him back to Jesus to fulfill the quest—for worship and relationship with Jesus and his followers. This healed Samaritan isn't shy about it. He praises God loudly; he falls at Jesus' feet. He has been transformed. At the end of his quest, we see him whole, in full voice and full faith.

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. But I wonder, 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 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. His story of healing turned into a story of an outsider who was welcomed into God's plan of salvation. The man from

¹ The sermon is drawn from Week 6 of "Seeking God Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#) and Week 2 Worship Resources written by Alissa Bender, *Leader, Summer 2018*, Vol. 15, No. 4, ©2018 MennoMedia p. 43.

Samaria came to understand that because he took the time to stop and say thank you. The other men received what they asked for, but appear to have missed out on the abundance that God offers.

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 did before March 2020. We're used to thinking about contagious disease, isolation, and quarantine. We continue to live 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 that came with the pandemic and its aftermath. It's nearly impossible to be grateful for current economic conditions, the political climate in this country and around the world, and deep divisions within the church. 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 some of the changes the obstacles of the last few years forced us to make. We're grateful for the time and space created in our lives, for new ways to connect with each other. 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.

Giving thanks, an attitude of gratitude, orients us toward Jesus and the transformation he works in our lives. We give thanks 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. 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."

Our call to worship this morning was adapted from a passage in Colossians. These words help us learn how giving thanks fits with other practices in following God's ways, of living as God wants us to live. Reading Colossians 3:12-17:²

¹² Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. ¹³ Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. ¹⁴ And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. ¹⁵ The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. ¹⁶ The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ Whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God the Father through him.

I'll end by quoting a few lines from a children's book by Eileen Spinelli, titled *Thankful*.³

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 as individuals and as a congregation, in person, 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!

² Colossians 3:12-17, *Common English Bible*.

³ Eileen Spinelli, *Thankful*, Zonderkidz, 2015