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Extraordinary Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

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When I was about ten years old, I remember getting a phone call from one of my aunts. Apparently, she had sent me a birthday present, and I had never written her a thank you note, and she was offended. "Good boys always write thank you notes," I recall her telling me. When I hung up the phone I went downstairs and wrote a thank you note to her. But I remember two things clearly about the writing of that note. First, there wasn't an ounce of gratitude in my heart as I wrote that card. Guilt and shame? Yep, plenty of that. But no real gratitude. And the second thing I remember is thinking to myself, "If it was really a gift why did it cost me a thank you note?"

Now, I'm not implying that writing thank you notes is a bad thing. Not at all. Expressing our thanks to one another is always the right thing to do, and a thank you note is a wonderful way to do just that. I told you that story because I've become aware that it's the lens through which I've read today's scripture text for most of my life, and I think I've been reading it all wrong. Let's read it together from Luke 17:11-19 and I'll explain what I mean.

As Jesus continued on toward Jerusalem, He reached the border between Galilee and Samaria. As he entered a village there, ten men with leprosy stood at a distance, crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" He looked at them and said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed of their leprosy. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back to Jesus, shouting, "Praise God!" He fell to the ground at Jesus' feet, thanking him for what he had done. This man was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" And Jesus said to the man, "Stand up and go. Your faith has healed you."

This is the word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God!

I've probably preached on this story a dozen times or more, especially around Thanksgiving, and all

along I've read it through the lens of my experience with my aunt. From that perspective Jesus is my aunt. The nine ungrateful lepers are me, and the one grateful leper is the good little boy I should have been all along. The whole point of the story, from this perspective, is to scold us for not be very grateful for all we have. It's a holy phone call shaming us into sitting down and writing Jesus a thank you note.

Now, unless we're related in ways I don't know about, you've probably never gotten a call from my aunt and been yelled at for not writing her a thank you note. But I'd be willing to bet that you hear the story of the ten lepers just as I've always heard it. I'll bet you hear this story and feel convicted of being a bad little boy or a bad little girl. The bottom-line message you get is that Jesus is angry with you because you really ought to be more grateful to him than you are. That's how I've always read the story. But I think I've been missing the point, and maybe you have too.

Let's look again at what happens in this story. Ten lepers approach Jesus at a distance, which is what you're supposed to do when you're a leper so that you don't make someone else ritually "unclean". And the lepers called out to Jesus, asking Jesus to have pity on them, which was their way of asking Jesus to heal them. And Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priest. Why does he tell them that? When a leper believed that they were healed they were required to go to the priest for inspection to be declared "clean". And while they are on their way all ten of them are cleansed, healed from their leprosy. Every one of them receives what they asked for, and more. One of the lepers, however, saw that he was healed and turned around, praising God with a loud voice. And when this one found Jesus, he fell at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

The more I've reflected on this story the more I've come to believe that the point isn't that the nine were bad because they didn't return to thank Jesus. The point, I think, is that the nine missed the greater gift. All ten were healed of their leprosy.

And in fact, all ten showed faith in Jesus' ability to heal by heading off to see the priest even before they experienced healing. But in returning to give thanks that one leper came to know not just healing but the Healer.

This story isn't about being chastised for being ungrateful. I think this is a story of Jesus seeking us, yearning for us, longing that the goodness of this life and the miracles that happen in our lives every single day might not just to cause us to express an occasional word of thanks but to compel us into a deepening relationship with the One who is our hope, our forgiveness and our life. It isn't about scolding us for being like the nine but begging us to be the like the one who understands the intimate connection between the miracles and the miracle worker, the healing and healer, the gift and the gift-giver.

I've said before that the most powerful spiritual practice I know is the practice of gratitude. Practicing gratitude connects my heart to God, reminding me that God is the giver of all good things. It changes the way I see the world, from scarcity to abundance. It produces joy and stirs me to greater generosity. And so, I've made it a habit to pause each day and reflect on the things for which I'm grateful. But over the last year or so I've been sensing God calling me to be grateful, not just for a few things, and not just for a few moments each day, but to cultivate an awareness that all of life, everything, is a gift and a miracle and a reason for gratitude.

Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, puts it this way, "People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child--our own two eyes. All is a miracle."

If we could learn to see everything as an extraordinary gift from God, then our lives would be marked by extraordinary gratitude.

Brother David Steindl-Rast says it so well. Watch this...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Gm-G_4c5a8]

You may be here this morning in need of physical, emotional or relational healing, or you may be here celebrating that you have been healed. Either way, don't miss the Healer. You may be here in great financial need, or you may have more than you know what to do with. Either way, don't miss the Giver. You may be here today begging for a miracle, or you may be here giving thanks for a miracle you've received. Either way, don't miss the miracle worker. No matter what the circumstances of your life today, no matter how difficult or joyous, we all have this one thing in common – the gift of life in Jesus. And so, we all have reason to give extraordinary thanks.

Let me close this morning with a story. It is the story of a Lutheran pastor by the name of Martin Rinkhart. He was pastor of one congregation for thirty years, a Prussian church during the Thirty Years War in Europe. From the year the war began until the year the war ended, he was the pastor in the same walled city. Because his was a walled city, all the refugees from the thirty years war flocked into his city to find safety as the battles raged around them. The city was overrun with poverty, the plague, and all the perils of war. It was awful. It was hell on earth.

By the end of the thirty years war, he was the only pastor left in town alive; all the other pastors had died, so he alone had the task of burying the plagued villagers and refugees from war. Somewhere in the middle of all of that suffering, he wrote a hymn. The words of that hymn go something like this:

"Now, thank we all our God; with hearts and hands and voices; who wondrous things hath done; in whom this world rejoices. Who from our mother's arms, has blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love and still is ours today."

Don't give thanks today because you have to. That wouldn't be real gratitude. Give thanks today because every blessing, every one of those countless blessings, both great and small, is an invitation to celebrate the goodness of the One who gives us faith, hope and love now and forever: Jesus Christ our Lord. Let's sing.