

# RETURNING THANKS

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**LUKE 17:11-19**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**OCTOBER 13, 2013/21<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
(THANKSGIVING SUNDAY)**

We've spent the last month or so in the book of Luke, and we have discovered that Jesus says some very strange things that aren't always easy to understand.

There have been texts about masters and slaves and rich people in agony in hell, about how with an ounce of faith we can tell a mulberry tree to be planted in the sea, about a dishonest manager being praised for his shady handling of his master's resources....

We've come across some difficult and confusing texts

Our text today is not one of these texts.

In fact, as I was preparing this week, the meaning of the text almost seemed *too* obvious.

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday. We have a story about gratitude and thanksgiving. The message seems to be fairly simple. Like the one leper who returned praising God for the healing he had received from Jesus, we ought to be people who remember to thank God for the good things in our life and to render praise where it is properly due.

End of story. Right?

Well, kind of, actually. If that message was all we walked away with today, I would count it a very good sermon indeed!

But as always, there are layers to texts, and there is a bit more going on in this story than might first appear.

So, I want to peel back a few of these layers this morning, and I want to do this by asking the questions that all kids are told to ask as they learn to read a story well.

We're going to look at this story through the lens of the five W's. I think that in doing so we will gain a deeper appreciation of a story that is quite a bit more than a nice object lesson for promoting gratitude.

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## **Who?**

Well, we have Jesus. Obviously.

Jesus, this strange teacher, prophet, healer, who talked about the kingdom of God....

Jesus upon whom the Holy Spirit descended, validating him as God's agent... Jesus, the royal king in David's line... Jesus, the suffering servant who would redeem his people and welcome the nations, as foretold by the prophets...

Jesus, who kept unsettling the powerful and influential and the religious, but to whom the poor, the helpless, the rejected, the outcasts were drawn like magnets...

Jesus, who would ultimately take the sin of the world upon himself on the cross and rise on the third day...

We also have **Lepers**. Ten of them.

Leprosy was a bacterial infection that led to lesions on the skin, and permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes.

Aside from the physical effects of this disease, there was a social stigma attached to it in all parts of the ancient world. It was believed to be contagious and so lepers were often quarantined and not permitted contact with others.

In the Jewish world that Jesus was operating in, lepers would have been ritually unclean and forbidden from participating in the rituals and life of the people of Israel.

In Leviticus 13, after a long list of which skin diseases made one unclean and the steps the priest must take to decide upon who is clean or unclean, healed or not, etc., (a lit that includes, incidentally, an uncomfortable passage about if and when someone who is bald could be declared "clean" 😊) we read:

<sup>45</sup> “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’<sup>46</sup> As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.

This is why the lepers keep their distance as Jesus approaches them. This is why Jesus commands them to show themselves to the priests to verify that they were healed.

We also have one leper, in particular—a **Samaritan**. As we read, Jesus is in the region between Samaria and Galilee.

We know about Samaritans from the more famous story of the Good Samaritan, but this “who” is worth unpacking a bit more.

Samaria was a province north of Judea and its capital of Jerusalem. So the Samaritans were close neighbours of the Jews but were generally despised and looked down for a number of historical reasons.

The division of these two people groups went all the way back to the time after the death of Solomon when Israel’s allegiances were split between Solomon’s son and one of Solomon’s former officials.

So one nation became two: the two southern tribes became known as Judah and their capital was Jerusalem. The ten northern tribes became known (somewhat confusingly) as Israel and their capital was Samaria.

These ten northern tribes were eventually conquered and assimilated by the Assyrians and the race that emerged from the intermarrying of the Israelites and the Assyrians became known as the Samaritans.

The Samaritans continued to worship the same God as their southern neighbours but the rivalry between the two led to the development of two streams of tradition. The Samaritans were geographically isolated and did not make their annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem for festivals or other holy days.

Among many other historical grievances, most Jews resented the Samaritans because they had hindered the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple after the Jews had

returned from their time in exile under Babylon and later Persia. Later they had aided the Syrians in several wars against the Jews.

So the general view of Samaritans was that they were traitors who couldn't be trusted as well as illegitimate heirs of God's promises. This hatred was also a religious rivalry since both groups argued that **they** were the rightful heirs of the promise of God.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, we have the **priests**, the guardians of Israel's rituals, the managers of the system that everyone depended upon to have access to God, forgiveness, ritual purity, etc.

### **Where?**

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, in the region between Samarian and Galilee

Perhaps more significantly, Jesus is kind of in "the borderlands," far from centre of religious and political power. Jesus would come to Jerusalem later, but it's worth remembering that a large chunk of Jesus' ministry and miracles took place in "the sticks."

Even the geography of Jesus' ministry speaks volumes about who he was and what he was about.

### **When?**

We are kind of at the midpoint of Luke's narrative of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is already seen as a lightning rod, figure of controversy, there is conflict building with religious establishment of Israel.

The kingdom of God being proclaimed and people are being divided.

### **What?**

Well, healing, of course.

And, as we have seen from the previous description of the social and communal effects of leprosy, these healings would have been *much* more than restoring physical health.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful to Gil Dueck for this summary of the history of Samaritans.

This isn't Jesus curing people of a cold here. This is a healing that goes far beyond the physical realm. It would have had profound social, relational, and spiritual implications. It would have been like quite literally giving these ten people new lives.

Almost like a resurrection from the dead.

### **Why?**

To proclaim Jesus' power over death, suffering, sin, disease, and everything that is not as it should be.

In the gospels, healings are always more than physical healings. They are a sign of the kingdom—a sign of God's inbreaking into history, a sign of the fulfillment of the words of the prophets.

Jesus' miracles always point *beyond*—they are never ends in and of themselves. They are not magic tricks to prove that Jesus has special powers. They are always meant to invite people into the broader reality of God moving to redeem and restore his world and his people.

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So, putting the pieces together, we have this bigger picture of Jesus restoring ten people to physical, relational, and spiritual health...

We have Luke's emphasizing that it was a Samaritan outsider alone who responded appropriately to this gift of life, thus messing around—again!—with people's categories of what kind of people God preferred...

... and about how *all of this* functioned as dramatic announcement and embodiment of the decisive inbreaking of the God of the universe into history, acting upon his promises from Israel's scriptures from long ago...

Given *all of this*...

### ***Why would these nine lepers not return to give praise to God?***

Were they afraid of what the priests would say about this polarizing, troublemaker prophet? Were they afraid they would be in trouble?

Were they too excited, overjoyed, preoccupied with all of the attention that undoubtedly would have been coming their way? Were they instantly swallowed up in a crush of well-wishers and astounded onlookers and family and friends?

We're not told.

We're simply pointed to one who *does* locate his joy and gratitude in the praise of God—the unexpected one, the despised and hated one in contrast with the nine who we would expect to know better.

Of course, the question is not just a theoretical one about a text in the Bible. It is a question that is asked of us, too. Every day.

Why do we not praise God for the good things in our lives? The unexpected gifts? The instances of grace?

The new life that we have been given as those who have put our trust in this same Jesus, this same God who is alive and active in our world?

Perhaps it is sheer forgetfulness. We take goodness for granted.

We hear often about the problem of evil—about the struggle to believe in the goodness of God in the midst of all the evil we see in our world.

But we don't often hear about "the problem of good." Why should there be such a thing as beauty? Why should sunsets and mountains and little babies and oceans and prairie fields affect us the way they do? Why should instances of love move us? Why should there be such a thing as grace?

None of these things *needed* to be in our world, nor did we *need* to be the kind of creatures who responded to them as we do.

And yet these things and our deep connection to them seldom seem to require explaining. We just assume that they should be part of the world we inhabit.

Or, perhaps it is guilt. How can we thank God for our blessings when so many have so little around the world? Isn't it a little flippant and insensitive to praise God for our

blessings when these blessings are not experienced by others? Haven't we all rolled our eyes upon hearing someone return from an experience of poverty and suffering in another culture with the lesson that they need to be more determined to thank God for their blessings?

And yet... There are other ways to be grateful. Other ways where gratitude is not a flippant response to the pleasures of excess, but a truly grateful response for provision and a deep understanding that true thankfulness is linked to a disciplining of desire and a determination to walk rightly under the providence of God.

Perhaps it is suspicion that cultivating a life of gratitude and properly ordered worship won't *work*.

Perhaps we worry that an open-handed and openhearted approach to life will lead to our being taken advantage of or mocked or ridiculed.

Perhaps we think that people will see us as naïve—as if anyone who *really* understood the world couldn't *possibly* respond with gratitude.

There are many reasons why we aren't instinctively grateful people.

At the end of the day, though, ingratitude is easy. Perhaps too easy. It's not hard to find things in our world and in our lives *not* to be thankful for.

Perhaps choosing gratitude is like an act of defiance. It is a declaration that the many things that weigh us down and (rightly) make us sad and angry and confused are, ultimately, passing away—that they are less real than the good, the true, the beautiful.

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The title of today's sermon is "**Returning Thanks.**" It's a phrase that we frequently hear, but it's a bit strange when you think about it. What does it mean to *return* thanks?

Did the thanks arrive *to* us from somewhere? Where are we sending thanks *back* to?

I didn't hunt down the origins of the phrase today, and I am quite confident that this has nothing to do with what it initially mean, but **I like to imagine that the phrase could point to the reality that to be thankful people is to, in a sense, *come home, to return to the way we were meant to live in relationship to God.***

At the end of the day, all that we have and all that we are—the very presence of life itself—is sheer gift. This is a truth that we could probably keep returning to again... and again... and again.

I have used this quote in many contexts before, and almost certainly in a sermon here at LMC, but it is too good not to share again on this Thanksgiving Sunday. It comes from Miroslav Volf's excellent book, *Free of Charge*:

A rich self has a distinct attitude towards the past, the present, and the future. It surveys the **past** with gratitude for what it has received, not with annoyance about what it hasn't achieved or about how little it has been given. A rich self lives in the **present** with contentment. Rather than never having enough of anything except for the burdens others place on it, it... strives out of a satisfied fullness, not out of the emptiness of craving. A rich self looks toward the **future** with trust. It gives rather than holding things back in fear of coming out too short... because its life is "hidden with Christ" in the infinite, unassailable, and utterly generous God, the Lord of the present, the past, and the future.

A rich self is who has "returned" to a life of gratitude, contentment, and trust.

If we decide to live in this way, we will be the kind of people that Jesus will look at and say,

"Get up—rise to life, and *keep* rising to new life, every day...

"Go on your way... even though it may be a difficult way, a way with obstacles, a way with a mixture of joys and sorrows and victories and frustrations, even though the way that we walk isn't always easy...

Get up.

Go.

Your faith has made you well.

Thanks be to God.