

Say Thank You!

Luke 17:11-19

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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It's Thanksgiving Sunday and we all know what the sermon is going to be about, right? I'm supposed to stand up here and tell us all to be more grateful for the blessings in our lives.

And so, I will. Sort of.

But I want to do it in such a way that doesn't come across as something like a parent wagging their finger at an ungrateful child who didn't respond appropriately to a gift.

Now, Johnny, you say thank you! Say thank you!! And you'd better mean it!

I'm sure we've all found ourselves in awkward encounter like this at some point in our lives. Somehow the grudging expression of thanks that eventually emerges from the grumpy child's mouth feels less than genuine.

So, I'd like to avoid this today. I want to ask the simple question, "*Why* say thank you?"

Every year in October and November (American Thanksgiving), I encounter a litany of articles and podcasts and blog posts extolling the importance of gratitude.

Yesterday, I read one from the Harvard Medical School:

Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.¹

Sounds pretty good. Who wouldn't want these things? But the article left me feeling like gratitude was largely instrumental—it was a means to the end of human well-being.

¹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/in-praise-of-gratitude>

Then I listened to a podcast called “The Happiness Lab.” The episode was called “The Silver Lining” and it looked at how much of our happiness and gratitude is based on the “reference points” we choose in evaluating our experiences and station in life.

Silver medalists, it turns out, are generally less happy than bronze medalists. The silver medalist is one position away from gold; the bronze medalist is one position away from no medal at all.

In the same way, people who made \$100 000/year but were surrounded by people who made more than them were less happy and less grateful than those who made \$50 000/year but were surrounded by people who made roughly the same or less than them.

The point of the podcast was that we need to re-evaluate our “reference points.” We tend to naturally compare ourselves to who have more or have accomplished more or who have suffered less or who are more socially connected or generally look like they are *doing life better* than us.

To be happy and grateful people, we need to adjust our perspective. Like in this image.

[image]

This seems an improvement on the Harvard article where gratitude was at times portrayed as little more than a good mental health strategy.

The happiness lab adds a communal aspect to our gratitude—a willingness to look outside of ourselves and to resist the temptation to always be comparing ourselves to those who seem to have it better than us.

This, too, was good. But reminding yourself to be grateful because other people have it worse or finding better reference points for your comparison to others still seemed to be somehow less than what gratitude at its best might have to offer.

Well, let’s leave aside the science and sociology of gratitude and happiness and look to our Scripture passage of the morning.

We have what appears on the face of it to be a fairly straightforward object lesson on the importance of saying thank you.

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 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. And we might deepen our understanding of gratitude along the way.

Who?

Well, we have Jesus. Obviously.

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, lepers would have been ritually unclean and forbidden from participating in the rituals and life of the people of Israel.

Leviticus 13 contains 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 (it's a list that includes an uncomfortable passage about if and when someone who is bald could be declared "clean" ☺). In this passage we read:

⁴⁵ "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!'⁴⁶ 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 later will command 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.

Samaritans, as we know, were not looked upon kindly by faithful Jews.

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.

What followed were periods of conquest and intermarriage and the development of two streams of tradition regarding worship and identity.

The general Jewish view of Samaritans was that they were traitors who couldn't be trusted as well as illegitimate heirs of God's promises.

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, and belonging.

Where?

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, in the region between Samarian and Galilee. He's set his face toward the city where he knows he must go.

Perhaps more significantly, Jesus is kind of in "the borderlands," far from centre of religious and political power. The climactic events of Jesus' story take place in Jerusalem, 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 is 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.

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.

I think that this image created by an artist in Cameroon gets at what this might have looked of felt like for the lepers and for the community.

[image]

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.

So, putting the pieces together, we have this bigger picture of Jesus restoring ten people to physical, social, 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 which people God preferred... (Luke does this quite frequently).

... and about how *all of this* functioned as dramatic announcement and embodiment of the 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 because their healing came from an illegitimate source?

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?

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

Maybe 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. It's too easy. It's not hard to find things in our world and in our lives *not* to be thankful for.

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.

The title of my sermon this morning is “Say Thank You!” And I want to return to the simple question: Why?

I think we can put it all together.

1. Because gratitude is good for us.

I think that articles like the one from the Harvard Medical Review and podcasts like the Happiness Lab have important things to remind us of. Gratitude *is* good for our well-being. We *will* tend to lead healthier, happier, more peaceful lives if we choose gratitude as a way of life. This is as it should be, because this is how we have been created.

2. Because gratitude and generosity are connected

True gratitude doesn't hoard blessing, it extends it outward. In the image I showed previously, if all the guy in the nice car took from being reminded of his privilege was to say, “Boy, I sure am thankful that I'm not in a wheelchair,” and then zipped merrily on his way, we would feel like he had missed something pretty important, right?

We somehow think that having our reference points changed should lead to actions of solidarity and shared suffering, right?

Our gratitude for all that God has done for us ought to lead us to become the sorts of people and churches that are good news for outsiders, for those who are socially isolated, for those whose experience of the world, like the lepers, is one of suffering and of feeling like they're always on the outside looking in to goodness and blessing.

3. Because it orients us properly toward God.

The expression “thank you” implies that there is someone to whom our gratitude is owed. The Samaritan leper understood this in the starkest terms possible. The giver of his gift was standing right in front of him. He had no illusions about where it had come from.

Few of us experience healings this dramatic. And so, our gratitude can easily become kind of vague, generic, impersonal. We’re happy about the nice things we enjoy and we’re glad to cast a glance heavenward from time to time.

Debie Thomas contrasts this with the gratitude expressed by the leper who was healed:

But this is not the kind of thankfulness the tenth leper expresses. His is the kind that wells up from the deepest caverns of his yearning and sorrow. His is the kind that takes nothing for granted. His is the kind that notices how rare, how singular, and how gorgeous grace is when it comes to the borderlands and says, “Come on in. Yes, you. YOU.” His is the kind that finds God’s inclusive welcome stunning.²

This is, ultimately, the source of our gratitude. We are the recipients of God’s welcome and God’s gorgeous grace. God has said to *us*, “Come on in. Yes, YOU.”

This is good news. This is the best news.

So, say thank you, on this Thanksgiving Sunday. And mean it, for all the right reasons.

Amen.



² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2395>