

“Thanks!”

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**Luke 17:11-19**

<sup>11</sup>On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, <sup>13</sup>they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” <sup>14</sup>When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. <sup>15</sup>Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup>He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup>Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? <sup>18</sup>Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” <sup>19</sup>Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

In the book "A Window on the Mountain," Winston Pierce tells of his high school class reunion. A group of the old classmates were reminiscing about things and persons they were grateful for. One man mentioned that he was particularly thankful for Mrs. Wendt, for she, more than anyone else, had introduced him to Tennyson and the beauty of poetry. An old friend asked if he had ever thanked Mrs. Wendt, and he admitted that he had not. The friend suggested that he do so, and the man wrote a letter of appreciation to Mrs. Wendt, addressing it to the high school. The note was forwarded and eventually found the now long-retired teacher. About a month later, the man received a response. It was written in a feeble longhand and read as follows: "My Dear Willie, I can't tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my eighties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely, and like the last leaf of fall lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught school for fifty years and yours is the first letter of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has for years. Willie, you have made my day."

Expressing gratitude is a powerful thing, both for the person doing the thanking and the one receiving the appreciation. Some of you in this congregation can probably identify with Mrs. Wendt, the teacher in the story I just shared. Some of you have been teachers and perhaps can count on one hand the number of students who have returned to thank you. I have to admit that I have neglected to thank many of the teachers who have been instrumental in my life. That little word – "thanks" – carries a big impact. Of course, it is not only educators who have been lacking in people giving them thanks. Most of us are probably on both sides of the issue. We have longed for

someone to turn back and give thanks, and we also have been the one who did not turn back. Our Stewardship committee this year is inviting us all to think of ways we are grateful for First Pres. Since the church is the people, I think we could say we are thinking of ways we are grateful for *each other*. Gratitude – grateful living – or *thanksgiving*, as some have put it – is the way of life to which we are called. We should live lives of gratitude, giving thanks for the simple kindnesses extended to us by those around us, from someone holding the door open to saying the right thing at a difficult moment to greeting you with a warm smile to giving you a heartfelt hug to serving on a church committee to singing in the choir to teaching Sunday School to working behind the scenes so that worship and other activities go smoothly, and the list goes on and on. There are so many things that are done for us every day of our lives, and for those things we should show our gratitude. Saying “thank you” takes so little time, but it makes a big difference.

Saying “thank you” is one of those things we learn from childhood. There are certain questions that seem to be widespread in our culture. One of those is is often phrased one of the two following ways: either “have you forgotten something?” or “what do you say?” Either way, the child knows they are supposed to say “thank you.” Of course, sometimes that comes out in a less than excited tone, but it is a start. We teach this habit to our children, hoping that it actually is not just a habit, but an undergirding principle of their lives. We hope that they will not just grumble “thank you,” but will instead truly live in gratitude for what others do for them. Yes, we teach this attitude of gratitude to our children, and then we sometimes seem to grow out of it ourselves as adults. Yet, we do need to tell others that we are thankful for what they do.

But, of course, there's more to today's Gospel passage than being thankful to other *people*. We need to be thankful to our *God* for all of our blessings. In this familiar story, the ten are lepers. In Jesus's day, all skin diseases and ailments were lumped together under the term "leprosy." This included what we think of today as leprosy, which is actually now called "Hansen's disease." But it also included such disorders as psoriasis, eczema, and seborrheic dermatitis. Regardless of what their actual symptoms were, these ten men were outcasts. The law of Moses made it clear that they were to live far away from where everyone else lived, that they were to shout "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever anyone got near, that they were no longer part of the community. This was a terrible condition to have – not only did you have the physical symptoms of skin lesions and disfigurement, of nerve damage and possible blindness, but you also had to live a life of isolation. These rules were put in place for two reasons. One was for the protection of the others. We now know that most of those skin disorders are not the highly contagious matters they were believed to be in Biblical times, but the leaders of the day were doing what they believed best for the good of the whole. The other reason that lepers were outcasts was that medical issues such as this were thought to have a spiritual basis, and so these people were ones that "good folks" wanted to stay away from. These lepers really had two problems. In the story we read, ten lepers were healed, but only 1 was *made whole*.

Some have said that most preachers have only 1 or 2 sermons, and they preach variations of those two sermons week after week. If that is true, my two sermons are these, 1) God created us for relationship, with God and with each other, and 2) the "each other" part includes those we

want to label “outcast” or “outsider.” This story hits on both. Jesus healed all ten lepers. This was likely the biggest moment of their lives. They were no longer unclean, outcast. They could return to their communities, they could find work, they could return to *life*. And Jesus didn’t ask them to do anything for him. He actually told them to “go.” He told them to show themselves to the priests, and so it is a bit hard to fault them for just doing what he told them to do. But the Gospel tells us over and over again that it is those who go beyond just doing what they are *supposed* to do who truly get what the Kingdom of God is about. Ten lepers were healed, but only one turned around and thanked Jesus. He sought out that relationship that he was made for, and by doing so, he was not only healed, but made whole. Luke records Jesus as saying to the one, “your faith has made you well,” but that last word can be translated in multiple ways. It can be *healed, made well, saved, or made whole*. Regardless of how you translate it, this one received more than the others because he was thankful, because he connected with Jesus. We were made for relationship. No matter how often we try to dig into our little holes and hide away from the world – and God – God seeks us out, like the one lost coin or the one lost sheep. God longs to bring us back into the fold. We were made for each other, and we were made for God. We are made to live in gratitude for each other and for God.

But this story touches on that other sermon of mine, that those we call “outcast” are also a part of the Kingdom of God. The one who returned was not of Jesus’ ethnicity or religion. The one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan. We’ve talked about it before with the story often called *The Good Samaritan*, but Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Jews looked upon

Samaritans with utter disdain, as heretics, as inferior. This one, as an outcast because he was a leper, was also a Samaritan and so was a level *below* outcast. Luke tells the story in an interesting way. He tells us “one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.” The original hearers of this story would think, “Wow! What a great and faithful Jew that one was!” And then, Luke drops the bombshell, almost as a footnote: “And he was a Samaritan.” Those hearing this story suddenly were knocked off balance. *Wait a minute – the good guy can’t be a Samaritan, **again**, Jesus!*

The kingdom of God is always bigger than we understand. Just like those we read about in the Bible, we want to draw the circle smaller and smaller, and God draws the circle bigger and bigger.

Time after time, I’m amazed at how the stories in the Gospels have so many angles to them. We can look at this story as a call to be thankful to one another, to be thankful to God, and to expand our understanding of who is *in* the kingdom of God. I read this story as someone who has been in the church my whole life, baptized as an infant, brought up in Sunday School, worship, Vacation Bible School, church camps and retreats. I am also a seminary-trained, ordained minister of Word and Sacrament. I am about as much of an insider as they come. And so when I hear that the one thankful person was an outsider, I see this as a call to expand my way of thinking. But how does the outsider hear this story? What if I’m not the one in church my whole life? What if I’m the one being called heretic by insiders like me? What if I’m the one who has been told I’m “unclean”? Then I hear this story completely differently. I hear this story as a story of welcome, as a

wonderful call from my Creator to take my rightful place at the table. This story, to the outcast, is a beautiful call to come to relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ *and* with the God who made us all. It is a wonderful story, full of twists and turns, with something for everyone, something for which we all should be grateful.

This is a call to the outcast to be an outcast no longer, and it is a call to the insider to go into the highways and byways invite them to come in. And it is a call to all of us to a greater relationship with one another, and more importantly with God, a relationship that begins with one simple word: "Thanks!" Amen.