

“Thank You Notes”

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Scripture: Luke 17:11-19; Psalm 100

Today, as we begin the week that will lead us to turkey on Thursday, I offer some thank you notes—that is, some notes on the subject of saying thank you based on the story of Jesus’ healing of the ten lepers in the Gospel of Luke. How might this inform our attitude of gratitude this week?

Note that the one thank you out of ten came from the most outcast of the outcasts—the one who was seen as most unclean.

First, he was an outcast as a leper. Leprosy was the label for what we now suspect to be several different skin diseases. A diagnosis of leprosy meant enforced separation from society to preserve the community’s ritual purity and hygiene. Nobody wants you around. We might liken it to having permanent bedbugs or swine flu. The law prescribed how lepers should dress in order to emphasize and warn other people to avoid contagion. From the book of Leviticus:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Lev. 13:46)

In reality, lepers often lived with other lepers, as we see in the Luke passage. Even *among* the ten, however, the thankful man was likely to have been an outcast, because he was a Samaritan. While the “good Samaritan” may have earned Samaritans some brownie points, most Samaritans were looked down on by the Jews. They had intermarried with other groups and built a rival temple. In fact, because this man was a Samaritan and not a Jew, going to the priests as Jesus instructs was even less likely to cure him; the priests would not have seen him. The priests were not healers; they were the ones who declared a person clean or unclean.

And yet, when Jesus tells the man and the other nine lepers to go to the priests, they turn immediately and go. *“And as they went, they were made clean.”* In the act of obeying and believing, they are made whole.

God can heal even the most rejected, isolated, and unclean parts of us; and when that happens, our gratitude is deeper. The scripture says: *“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.”*

When God heals the parts of us that we don't want others to see, that keep us at a distance, that even we shun, then our gratitude is shot through with humility. *"He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him."*

Often—say, nine times out of ten—we attribute our good fortune to our own efforts rather than God's great generosity. A woman was driving around town looking for a parking space. She was late for an important appointment. "God," she said, "please, help me find a parking space." Just then, a car pulls right out of a nearby space, and she zipped into it, relieved. "God," she said, "never mind. I found one. Thanks anyway."

One more note about thank-yous: the nine who neglected to express their gratitude are still blessed and healed. God didn't need their thank-yous in order to heal them. God doesn't need our gratitude—but maybe we do.

Maybe we need to remember to be grateful most in the years when it is harder to do so. Maybe we need to summon our thanks and say them, sometimes, before we even feel them. Sometimes the spoken thank-yous come first, and true gratitude may follow.

Developing an attitude of gratitude is a lifelong and life-changing pursuit. Priest and writer Henri Nouwen put it this way:

To be grateful does not mean repressing our remembered hurts. But as we come to God with our hurts—honestly, not superficially—something life changing can begin slowly to happen. We discover how God is the One who invites us to healing. We realize that any dance of celebration must weave both the sorrows and the blessings into a joyful step.

Today, as we prepare for Thanksgiving and the beginning of Advent, next Sunday, I invite you to write a few thank-you notes to God. In your bulletins, you'll have noticed some slips of colored paper. Write down a few things that you're grateful for.

We're going to deliver the rest of this sermon together. What are you grateful for? Call it out. *"Praise God with a loud voice."*

We'll collect these thank-you notes during the offering. Then, at coffee hour, we can make them into a paper chain, which we'll put on the Christmas tree in the Parish House when it goes up. It'll be our Thanksgiving-into-Advent-thank-you note to God.

As the psalmist says:

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving and God's courts with praise. Give thanks to God; bless God's name. For the Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever, and God's faithfulness to all generations.

This has long been true. May it be true for us this year and every year of our lives. Amen.