

# Cultivating Thankfulness

(Luke 17: 11-19)

The story is told about a man whose wife had left him. He was completely depressed. He had lost faith in himself, in other people, in God--he found no joy in living. One rainy morning this man went to a small neighborhood restaurant for breakfast. Although several people were at the diner, no one was speaking to anyone else. Our miserable friend hunched over the counter, stirring his coffee with a spoon.

In one of the small booths along the window was a young mother with a little girl. They had just been served their food when the little girl broke the sad silence by almost shouting, "Momma, why don't we say our prayers here?" The waitress who had just served their breakfast turned around and said, "Sure, honey, we can pray here. Will you say the prayer for us?" And she turned and looked at the rest of the people in the restaurant and said, "Bow your heads." Surprisingly, one by one, the heads went down. The little girl then bowed her head, folded her hands, and said, "God is great, God is good, and we thank him for our food. Amen."

That prayer changed the entire atmosphere. People began to talk with one another. The waitress said, "We should do that every morning."

"All of a sudden," said our friend, "my whole frame of mind started to improve. From that little girl's example, I started to thank God for all that I did have and stopped majoring in all that I didn't have. I started to be grateful."

We all understand and appreciate the importance of gratitude. How it can radically change relationships. In fact, one of the first things we were taught and that we teach our children is to express their gratitude. Some one gives them some candy and we say: "Now what do you say?" And the child learns from an early age the answer "Thank you." And certainly we all know as adults that we appreciate being thanked.

When it comes to giving our thanks to God, I don't suppose there is any story in the Bible that is so endearing to us, so timelessly appropriate, as the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers.

The story begins: "<sup>12</sup>As he entered a village, ten men, all lepers, met him. They kept

their distance.” Imagine for a minute what it would have been like to be one of these lepers. These ten men walked the earth. They breathed and ate. They had hopes and fears and aspirations and feelings just like you and me. Yet, there was a tragic sense in which they were already dead. They were walking dead. Leprosy was the most dreaded of all ancient diseases. It ate away at the body and left its victim maimed and disfigured. There was no known cure. In their hopes for a family life, a useful occupation, plans for the future—they were dead men.

Their situation was made worse because leprosy was believed to be highly contagious. Actually, we know today that it is not. The scripture made it quite clear that as these lepers approached Jesus they stood at a far distance. Jewish law clearly prescribed that a leper could not get within fifty yards of a clean person. Everywhere these poor men journeyed they heard familiar words yelled out: “Unclean,” “Leper.” And then some would hurl stones at them to keep them away. Leprosy was a serious public health concern but it was tinged with the religious element of ritual uncleanness. So it was that they not only had to live with their physical handicap, but they were also isolated. They had to live in the hell of loneliness. That can do more to drain a person’s energy for living than the most horrible of diseases.

But even in the midst of this horrible situation these lepers had something to be thankful for. In their common misery they had banded together. They had found each other. It is interesting to note that one of these ten lepers was a Samaritan. Now a good Jew in that day in time would have no dealings at all with a Samaritan. They looked upon Samaritans as dogs, half-breeds. Yet, in the common misery of their leprosy these men had forgotten that they were Jew and Samaritan and realized only that they were men in need. Some of you might say, well it was a case of misery loves company. Maybe so. But I know that there is power in fellowship, especially the fellowship of people who have a common need. Even lepers found it so.

*I) Even in the midst of our problems there is always something for which to be thankful.*

Which, I think, brings us to the first point of the story, which is simply this: Even in the midst of our problems there is always something for which to be thankful. Some of you may be thinking: Well, that’s easy to say, but you don’t know the problems and circumstances that I am dealing with now. Certainly I would not deny the reality of the problems that exist. In many cases very deep and troubling pains and sorrows. And

yet in the midst of these problems we can cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving.

I have always been touched by the story that surrounds the great Thanksgiving Hymn “Now Thank We All Our God.” We will be singing it in a few minutes time. Lutheran pastor Martin Reinkard wrote this hymn in 1637 at the time of the Thirty Years War in Germany. A wall fortified the city of Eilenburg in which he was a pastor, so it became a haven for refugees seeking safety from the fighting. But soon, the city became too crowded, food supplies dwindled, a famine hit and then a terrible plague and Eilenburg became a giant morgue. In that single year, over 6000 persons in Reinkard’s German village, including his wife and all of his children, died from the plague. He conducted 4,500 funerals in that year alone including his wife’s. Remarkably, it was in the midst of that catastrophic personal and social loss that Reinkard sat down and wrote the great hymn of thanksgiving: “Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices.”

It was that same sense of hope and faith that enabled the apostle Paul to sit in a dingy prison cell and write the words we heard read from Colossians a few minutes ago:

<sup>15</sup>Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. <sup>16</sup>Let the Word of Christ--the Message--have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! <sup>17</sup>Let every detail in your lives--words, actions, whatever--be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Perhaps Daniel Defoe gave us some good advice through his fictitious character Robinson Crusoe. The first thing that Crusoe did when he found himself on a deserted island was to make out a list. On one side of the list he wrote down all his problems. On the other side of the list he wrote down all of his blessings. On one side he wrote: I do not have any clothes. On the other side he wrote: But it’s warm and I don’t really need any. On one side he wrote: All of the provisions were lost. On the other side he wrote: But there’s plenty of fresh fruit and water on the island. And on down the list he went. In this fashion he discovered that for every negative aspect about his situation, there was a positive aspect, something to be thankful for. It is easy to find ourselves on an island of despair. When we find ourselves on that island perhaps that is the time to sit down and take an inventory of our blessings.

*II) In the midst of problems thanksgiving needs to be expressed.*

Even in the middle of suffering reasons can be found to give thanks. That is the first lesson. But we cannot stop there. Finding reasons to be grateful is well and good but the second lesson of the story is far more important: In the midst of problems thanksgiving needs to be expressed.

Look at the story again with me. As Jesus entered this village this band of ten lepers sought him out. Word had already reached them that this itinerant miracle worker had cured a single leper in a village not distant from their own. We read about this in Luke chapter 5. As a group, they approached him with the words: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Jesus responded: "Go show yourselves to the priests." Initially that may sound strange to us, but the fact is that the priests of that day were also public health officers. If a person had been cured from an infectious disease, he had to present himself to the priest to receive a health certificate. No doubt the lepers were puzzled by Jesus' command. To say that it was premature was an understatement. Why bother to get a certificate of health when you haven't been cured? Yet, they believed his words and they did as he commanded.

I don't know how to explain what happened next. I can't begin to explain how it happened, other than the Holy Spirit touched these men as they were on their way to the priest. Their numbness began to pass. The wretched sores that scarred their hands and faces began to vanish. Their flagging strength began to return. Luke simply words it this way. ." They went, and while still on their way, became clean." As they had obeyed the command of Christ their longing for healing had come.

At this point we feel that we don't have to even finish the story for we certainly know how it will end. These cured men will go running back to Jesus with the words: "Blessed healer", "Great Physician", "Praise be to Jesus." But no. That's not how the evangelist tells the story at all. Nine of the ten were never heard from again.

Off the coast of Evanston Illinois there comes the story of a shipwreck. The students of Northwestern University came to the rescue. One student, Edward Spenser, personally saved the lives of 17 persons that day. Years later a reporter was writing a follow up story on the event, and went to interview the now elderly Spenser. When asked what was the one thing that stood out about the incident in his mind; Spenser replied: "I remember that of the seventeen people I saved that day, not one of them

ever thanked me.”

But there was one who returned. One came back and as the scriptures say he returned to “Praised God with a loud voice.”

What an ending! If you look at the percentages it’s a powerful picture of man’s ingratitude but a more powerful portrait of thanksgiving if you look at the one grateful leper. This enduring image of the one grateful leper reminds us to choose the better way. But wait. There is one more lesson here. It is an irony inserted at the very end. The one who returned was a Samaritan. The half-breed, the outcast, the Gentile, the one considered unholy, showed just how holy his heart really was. He expressed his gratitude. And to this man Christ gave not only a physical blessing but also a spiritual blessing. He said to him: “Go your way. Your faith has saved you.” The other nine, who were probably all Jews, had been freed from the misery of leprosy, but they were still in bondage to the misery of ingratitude.

On this thanksgiving Sunday this story reminds and invites to acknowledge that even in the midst of problems there are reasons for us to be thankful and to also remember that thanksgiving needs to be expressed. As we remember these two points then we will heed Paul’s words to us this morning to cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving.