

BEYOND THE GIFT IS THE GIVER

October 13, 2013

Luke 17:11-19

Traveling one day along the border between Galilee and Samaria, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus approached a village where ten seriously ill men came out to meet him. Ten lepers, ten men afflicted by the worst disease imaginable in Jesus' day.

Leprosy was incurable, leprosy was disgusting, leprosy was revolting. Leprosy was considered proof that you were the vilest kind of sinner. God was punishing you for something really bad. If you had leprosy, you actually watched your body rot away.

Your fingers, your ears, your nose dropped off. You died a slow and painful death, cut off from society, cut off from family and the only friendships you had were others like you.

Nine others in this case that kept reminding you as you looked at them how really bad you were. Ten lepers, ten dying, decaying, stinking wretches met Jesus and cried, "Jesus, Master Have mercy on Us."

They must have known this was their only chance to escape the awful consequences of their disease. If Jesus did nothing for them, surely their lives would end in a slow painful death.

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us " Can you imagine - that air was filled with tension as the ten lepers, as ten lives hung on the words or actions of the Man of Galilee.

"Jesus, Master, Have Mercy on Us".
He didn't touch them.

"Jesus Master, Have mercy on us".
He didn't wash them.

"Jesus, Master have mercy on us."
He didn't even pray for them.

Finally, finally after what seemed to be an eternity for these desperate men, Jesus spoke: "Go, show yourselves to the priests."

According to Jewish law, which you can check out if you like in the 14th chapter of Leviticus, if a leper thought that his leprosy had gone away he was supposed to present himself to a priest, who could declare him clean.

So Jesus was telling these men to go to the priest for certificates of cleansing.

He had not healed them. They weren't healthy--but they were to go and get a health certificate to proclaim they were healed. Jesus said, "Go get a physical examination."

Can you imagine their situation. They must have stood and looked at each other and then started to debate this command. They might have said, "But we have already been there and they couldn't do anything for us. You have got to be kidding.

Go show yourselves to the priests. They had surely expected something more, something else.

Yet something of their desperation, and their growing, but doubting faith and confidence led these ten men to turn and start walking toward the priests.

Something about this man of Galilee led them to obey, to go, to do what they had done before. But this time, Jesus had told them to go.

Then it happened. At some point, some instant--quite by surprise---those ten outcast lepers were changed. Every diseased cell in their bodies was changed.

Every cell suddenly sprang into full health signaled by an unseen force. A force of events which began in a twinkle of an eye, in a flash of excitement as one of the ten noticed his body becoming healthy.

Who was the first to notice? We don't know, but with tremendous swiftness the reaction must have sped through the group.

In amazement, they stopped, looked at their hands, their feet, at each others ears, they were whole, they had been changed, Jesus had done it again. His reputation was true.

Ten suffering human beings had been touched by the healing power of God. Ten suffering men had encountered God's loving touch. Ten suffering men had been touched by the creating hand of God that was still very much at work in his world.

Can you picture them bounding down the road to the priest, now running, now leaping, now dancing, wondering how the priest would react... anticipating the glee, the excitement of their families as they would return home--healthy, alive, with a health certificate proclaiming to all what had happened.

All ten men caught up in the joy, the excitement of the moment.

But one of them halts in his tracks. He stops, he smiles, he turns, now walking, now running...back to the Master, back to this man of Galilee, back to this one who touched him with this mysterious force.

He comes back, "shouting, laughing, proclaiming glory to God with a joyful and thankful heart." He runs back to Jesus, falls at his feet and gives thanks for the great healing that had been done.

Only one of the ten who were touched by the love of this man of Galilee had seen beyond the miracle of healing to the one who had dared to risk for him.

He saw Jesus for who he was. One who cared, one who loved, one who wanted a relationship with everyone.

He saw Jesus as a man of love, a builder of relationships, he saw the miracle as Jesus' way of building a bridge between the fallen creation, the brokenness of disease and the loving hand of God who wants to reach into that brokenness with his creating and redeeming power. He saw Jesus.

Then notice Jesus response. "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine?" Only one in ten came back to give thanks. Only one in ten. Why, Jesus is asking, why only one in ten?

By dwelling on the fact that only one in ten came back, Jesus is telling us very plainly he wanted the thanks. He wanted them to see beyond the miracle to the miracle worker. He wanted them to come into a relationship with him.

What is the ratio for us today? Is it the same, one in ten? Let us try to examine in the next few moments why these nine cleansed men wandered in the valley of ingratitude when they should have been by the mountain of the one from who all blessings flow. Perhaps one reason they walked in the valley of ingratitude was they suffered from a lack of sensitivity and imagination. They never stopped and reflected on what happened.

They didn't think about who, or how this happened. They just took it for granted. They were healed. Their lives could go on, they had a lot of catching up to do, so they thought better be about it.

They couldn't see beyond the gift of the miracle of healing to the one who gave it to them. They never saw the giver.

Do you remember the Aesop fable, "Androcles and the Lion"? Androcles was a young boy who wandered off into the forest one day. Suddenly he came upon a lion which was groaning in pain.

Androcles turned to run away as fast as he could, and as he glanced over his shoulder to see how close that lion was, he noticed the lion had not run after him. So Androcles, stopped, turned back to the lion to see what was the matter.

He saw that the lion had a huge thorn in his paw. Androcles pulled it out and helped the lion to his den where the lion was healed.

A few days later, Androcles and the lion were captured. Androcles because he was a Christian and the emperor wanted some fun watching Christians being eaten in the theater, and the lion, because they needed one to do this deed.

Androcles was pushed out into the big arena and the lion came charging from the cage on the other side.

Androcles fell to his knees waiting for the huge mouth of the lion to devour him, but to his amazement, the lion stopped dead in his tracks, laid down and crawled towards Androcles, and began to lick his face and play with him.

It was the same lion who Androcles had helped, the one who had the thorn removed. The lion saw beyond the act of help to the helper, and responded in likeness when the opportunity arose.

Aesop always has a moral tacked on at the end of his fables, this one being: "Gratitude is the sign of noble souls."

Can you see the giver? Can you see beyond the gifts, the blessings, the love, the touch of grace in your life to the giver? Do you see the redeemer, the Christ, as you experience his touch in your life?

Maybe another reason that only one of ten returned to the healer, is the fact the other nine lacked humility. They saw in this act of healing something they were due.

Human beings can develop such an inflated sense of their own importance that we take everything good that comes our way as if it were our due.

We tend to take for granted as our due all those things that we have worked so hard for. We say we have paid our dues in life, now, now we can reap the rewards.

And as we tend to take things for granted, as we tend to look only to ourselves as the foundation for living, we become more and more possessive, more and more greedy, more and more wanting only the best, the biggest.

In I Timothy 6:6 we read, "Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth." When a person views the world as owing him or her everything, then contentment is never achieved.

In our contentment with the great gifts God has granted to us, we can see beyond the gifts to the giver.

But if we always focus on the gifts, we never see the giver, if we never look beyond our wish for more, if we cannot see beyond the need for the best, then contentment with life will never be achieved.

A man was talking to a farmer one day during the beginning months of the summer. It had been a late spring, with more than the usual amount of rain, so there were some good wet spots in the fields.

The crops were all planted and as far as the man's untrained eye could see, they were doing well. So, he asked the farmer how his crops were.

He said, "Those few wet spots I have aren't doing very well at all." The man said, "But those wet spots aren't your whole fields are they?" He said, "No!!" thank goodness."

Then the man asked, "How is the rest of your crop doing, those not in the few wet spots?" The farmer looked at him, smiled and said, "It is the best crop I have ever seen on my land." As the harvest came, he was right. He had a record harvest and even the wet spots did better than he expected.

But, that attitude of starting with the negative, starting with the point that he have a few bad acres, when the majority of the land was doing great shows a lack of humility, shows a lack of gratitude, shows the thinking that many have, they want it all, all or nothing.

Ten lepers got it all. A new life, a clean bill of health, a return to family and friends. But only one could see the greatness, only one could see the magnitude of the gift, only one could see the blessing.

We are all blessed by God in different ways, at different times with different blessings. Jesus is asking us to see beyond the gifts, beyond our own need of those things, to the giver.

To be humble and accept with a grateful heart what we have. And in that attitude a peace, a contentment about living will come.

We will see our blessings, our talents, our resources as coming from God, and then an amazing thing will happen.

Once we have that acknowledgement in our lives, God will lead us in ways that we would have never dared to go, ways that we can risk for our selves and others that will bring a blessing to the lives of those around us.

When God blesses us there is a double blessings. The one leper was doubly blessed. His body was made whole, but he saw beyond the healing to the healer and became for the church a symbol of the church's outreach to the whole world.

The healing of the ten lepers and the thankfulness of the one gives us insight into what the kingdom of God is like.

I like the way Martin Luther put it. He said, God would liberate us from "sin, death and the power of evil," and in that liberation we have a freedom to live, a sense of joy in our relationship with a loving God, and an adventuresome attitude about life that lets us dare to risk, an attitude that dares us to reach out because we know that God and I walking through life are a majority one."

When we are willing to surrender our selfishness and pride to live in God's grace, there comes a peace and contentment, and life can truly be exciting, fulfilling and a creative adventure no matter what your external circumstances.

There is an old story about two grasshoppers who fell into a bowl of cream. One of them complained and groaned over his plight, and he sank to the bottom and drowned. The other kept singing and cheerfully kicked his feet until the cream turned to butter and he hopped away to freedom.

Life can be that way. A Swedish proverb says: "Those who wish to sing can always find a song."

My prayer for you this day is that God and you may walk through life kicking and singing.