

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 17, 2004

Returning Thanks
Luke 17:11-19

In these days of polling, counting, estimating odds,
this story from Luke gives us some interesting numbers to consider.
Ten lepers ask Jesus for healing. Jesus heals ten lepers.

But only one leper returns to Jesus say thank you and to praise God.

What do we learn from this?

Is it that Jesus wasn't a very effective evangelist? Only 10% response?

Or is it that there's only a one in ten chance of a person becoming a Christian?

Or perhaps just that most of us are considerably less grateful than we ought to be,
and therefore live spiritually impoverished lives.

One commentator, reflecting on this story, has suggested that
"Gratitude may be the purest measure of one's character and spiritual condition.
The absence of the ability to be grateful reveals self-centeredness
or the attitude that I deserve more than I ever get,
so I do not need to be grateful.

I read this passage this week with a man who is a new follower of Christ,
just taking his first steps along the path of discipleship.
He told of his experience of having a week full of stressful days:
phone constantly ringing at work, one thing after another,
most of the call were people with problems looking to him for solutions,
everybody wanted a piece of him,
and the pressure got pretty intense.

He turned to God in prayer – in one of the most natural prayers of the human experience.
"Lord, HELP! Please help me through this day. Give me strength.
Give me some measurable success in my work today."

Help came to him that day, in the form of several profitable business transactions.
His stressful day paid off; he made money for his company;
and he felt good about the hard work he had done.

But as he was heading home, this new disciple of Jesus, stopped and thought,
"Hey, I asked God for help. Things went well today. My prayers were answered.
Am I going to just go home feeling good about my self.
Or stop right here and say a prayer of thanksgiving?
So, he stopped right there, turned his heart toward heaven,
and gave thanks to God."

Seems pretty basic, doesn't it?

Yet how often do we fail to see
that our blessings are a result of God's hand at work in our lives.
How often do we keep going on our way,
without giving thanks to the One who has shown us mercy,
without praising the Giver of every good and perfect gift?

Ten lepers were saved. Nine went on their way.
One turned back to give thanks and praise to God,
who had healed him through the mercy of Jesus, the Christ.

And something more happened
to the one who returned to Jesus to give thanks and praise.
Something more than what happened to the other nine.
All ten received mercy. All ten received healing.
But one completed the other half of the spiritual circle – returning thanks to God.
That one was made well.
In the words of the gospel, he was *saved*.
The word literally means “to be returned to a state of well-being,
to be made whole”

When we complete the spiritual circle of blessing
by returning our thanks to God,
our lives are made well, made whole; we are restored.
A life of gratitude is a life that experiences salvation.

I think I've shared with you before the Greek word play at work here.
“To give thanks”, in the Greek is *eucharisteo*.
And embedded in the word *eucharisteo*, is the word *charis*, which means “grace.”
God's grace comes to us, and we return it in gratitude.
Charis becomes *Eucharisteo*. Grace. Gratitude.

But how often do we break the circle, and miss this greater wholeness, this salvation?
How often do we go on our way, like one of the 9,
without returning thanks to the One who has blessed us?

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What's even more interesting about this story
is that the one who turns back to give thanks
is a Samaritan, an outcast – perhaps the one in the group of ten
who has the most to complain about, the most to be bitter about;
he's the most likely to say that “he deserves more than he ever gets.”
He's the one we would least expect to be grateful to Jesus.

I heard a story just the other day about gratitude from an unlikely source.
On Thursday, Pittsburgh Presbytery met at Eastminster Church in East Liberty.

We heard a report from three Young Adult Volunteers in Mission,
young women in their late teens, early 20s.
One young woman had recently returned from Sudan,
where she had been working with Church World Service.
It easily gets lost in the news about Iraq and the Presidential race,
but the UN has declared Sudan
the scene of the world's worst humanitarian crisis.
The people of Sudan are right now experiencing appalling suffering
as a result of a civil war that broke out in 2003,
a war which the United States has labeled genocide.
Today Sudan is mired in a crisis of malnutrition and disease,
and the humanitarian aid doesn't seem to be having an impact on the crisis.
The fatality rate is now up to 10,000 deaths per month.
(More people are dying in Sudan per month than we have lost
in September 11th, Afghanistan, and Iraq combined.)
Many of the refugees who do try to return to their villages to put their lives together again
are killed or maimed by land mines.

It was in the midst of this unfathomable human agony, a few months ago,
that this young woman heard the prayer of a Sudanese pastor
for his village.

He bowed his head and led his people in a prayer to God, saying,
"For the people of Sudan who are still alive
and who still have all their body parts,
to you, O God, we give our thanks and praise."

In those circumstances,
threatened by horrendous violence, weakened by starvation,
his village succumbing to disease,
that pastor fell down at Jesus feet and gave thanks,
praising God for those who were still alive,
and, literally, in one piece.

This is the essence of Christian faith. A life of thankfulness to God.
A spirituality that receives the grace of God, and returns that grace in deep gratitude.

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So, today, we (have had) the joy of receiving
new members into our fellowship.
For them, today (has been) an occasion of returning thanks.
God has blessed them, been merciful to them, poured grace into their lives,
in Jesus Christ.
And instead of just going on their way, content to be the recipient of blessing,
they have felt led to return to Jesus.
They (have returned) to Jesus' feet to say thank you, to praise God,

to complete the circle of grace and gratitude,
to embrace the Christian way of life
a way of thanksgiving, of continual returning, again and again,
to the feet of the One who has shown them mercy.

And to them, Jesus says,
to all of you here today who can find a reason to give thanks to God, Jesus says,
Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well.