

*What Stirs You to Give Thanks?*

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Psalm 100; Luke 17: 11-19; Colossians 3: 12-17

Ecumenical Thanksgiving Service

7:00 p.m. November 20, 2016

When we hear the story in Luke about Jesus healing ten lepers, only one of which returns to give thanks to God, we find ourselves searching for possible answers to Jesus' challenging questions: *Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?*

There are many possible explanations or scenarios, but I especially imagine two. When these lepers find themselves healed, they are stunned, shocked, astonished. They start walking in a complete daze to the temple, as Jesus directed them. They keep touching and looking closely at their arms and legs in amazement and disbelief, no more oozing sores, no more pain, only smooth, clean skin. Their faces are filled with awe and delight, but they are speechless. Each one keeps looking at the others to see if this is all really happening.

The other scenario I like to imagine is one of loud excitement and exclamations. Stunned, the lepers respond to their healing with whoops of joy and amazement: "Look at my hands and my legs! Do you believe it? Feel my face! How could this be real? I feel dizzy! You look amazing! Hurry, let's go show the priests! --along with running and skipping, slaps on the back, high fives, shouting out their good news to anyone on the road.

Of course, it may have been a combination of these scenarios—and more. All ten lepers probably wouldn't have responded in the same way.

Jesus' questions are definitely worthy of our examining, probing and discussing in relation to our behavior toward God and one another. But today, at this time of division in our nation, I am struck by a different question. What is it that causes the one leper, a foreigner no less, to turn back and praise God for his healing? Why does he respond differently from the others? Was he walking slowly and silently in a daze while the others were racing ahead, with whoops of joy?

What makes us stop, even turn around, and give thanks to someone, including God, for what has just happened?

I know that this question is in response to the unkind ways in which too many people have been treating each other before and following the elections. None of us is exempt from making derogatory remarks about others or lashing out in anger. All of us forget at times to say thank you or express gratitude. We can all act in ungracious and ungrateful ways, whether it is our intention or not.

So why does this one leper give thanks?

It's an ongoing question for us, but I thought of my visit to the MVD a few weeks ago, waiting in a long line for my turn at the counter. When I reached the head of the line, I could hear the MVD clerk handing forms to a woman and explaining how to fill them out. Then the woman just walked away ---without saying anything, no "thank you!" I was really struck by how rude it felt. The woman had a tired, blank look on her face, which is often the case after waiting a long time.

Of course, when it was my turn, I tried to compensate by thanking the clerk effusively. She didn't smile, but simply said "You're welcome; next!"

My guess is that expressing gratitude has everything to do with how we view other people in relation to ourselves and how open our hearts are to receiving words of kindness or gestures of help. It may be that we become so preoccupied with our own worries or irritations or needs, or we're so exhausted from work or grief or illness, that we forget to say Thank you---or worse, we don't feel much gratitude, even when someone is being kind to us. Our hurts and anger, or the turmoil around us, can crowd out gratitude, even when there are things in our lives that we do appreciate.

When that one leper was healed, I think that he felt more than his skin being healed. Even though Jesus didn't physically touch him, this leper felt some kind of vibrant connection in his heart, mind and body with the holy, with the divine. Maybe it felt like an awakening, a sudden aliveness, a lightness of being that filled him so that he just had to turn around and give thanks to the Source of life, to the Giver of new life. I see this leper on his way to being fully transformed, whereas the others may be healed only on the outside, with past hurts still weighing down their spirits.

I think of all the times when we say "Thank you" as a rote response, (we were of course brought up to be polite), and how different it feels when we say a Thank you that comes from the bottom of our hearts. Even in that quick moment with the clerk, I was aware of the feeling behind my Thank you. It was more than a reflexive response, because something had touched my heart.

I think of the outpouring of gratitude the knitters at our church receive when they give someone a prayer shawl. You have undoubtedly both given and received such emotional thanks to a special gift. It just wells up within you and binds you to the other person in a new way. While you may feel undeserving of such kindness, you also feel affirmed and may see both the giver and yourself in a new light.

What do you think it is that stirs leper to turn around and praise God?

What stirs your heart to give thanks? What will it be in the coming weeks?