

“Gratitude: A Sure Sign of Faith” 2016
Psalm 103:1-14, Luke 17:11-19

When you think about God, what sort of image do you envision? Although of course God is infinite, yet our understanding of God’s nature and our sense of God, are usually based on finite and familiar metaphors that derive from our life-lessons and experiences. A good friend in seminary told me that when she was growing up, her father was an alcoholic, a violent and abusive man, and she envisions God as everything her earthly father wasn’t a gentle, dependable and caring God who will always protect her and keep her safe ... and she would absolutely glow whenever she talked about her God. Another friend grew up in a very tense and perfectionistic home. Her parents were never satisfied and always demanded more, and no matter what, never felt she’d done well enough. Even with the assurance of grace, she was pretty sure that God was disappointed in her ... her religion was rigid and stressed obligation, duty and doing, and about trying to placate a distant and demanding angry God. So when you look to God, do you see yourself as mostly a sinful failure or as a beloved child of God?, and is your God more like a stern judge or a loving parent? Generally, the way we envision God dramatically shapes our religious outlook, our faith, and our spiritual journey. In the section of the Gospel of Luke that we read today Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, traveling toward the cross. And along this journey narrative, each of the events along the way are included intending to help the reader prepare & understand the purpose and meaning of what will happen in Jerusalem, which was to accomplish and reveal something about the nature of God, the Kingdom of God and grace.

Our Luke text begins, Luke 17:11, “on the way to Jerusalem.” That phrase serves to connect the story of this event to God’s whole purpose and plan in sending Jesus Christ, meaning that it’s far more than just a simple etiquette, “you didn’t even thank me” story. The story begins with 10 lepers crying out for mercy, and in keeping with the OT rules in Leviticus about leprosy, the diseased lepers kept some distance away from Jesus. In those days, leprosy was a most feared and dreaded, incurable disease, and stigmatized as a curse and a judgment from God. It meant living a terrible and hopeless existence of separation, cut-off from family and friends, even worship in the Temple. Incurable, they were the walking dead under a death sentence. In asking for mercy, they may have been just begging for alms, or perhaps they had heard about Jesus healing other lepers.

Luke 17:14

When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

His words must have seriously confused the still-diseased lepers yet nevertheless all the lepers obeyed his instructions, and as they traveled in obedience, they were made clean. In this case, faith began as hope, by calling out for mercy. Faith continued, by listening and obeying what Jesus said. I love to imagine their shocked joy, and wonder, and delight when along the way, God’s healing overtakes them, suddenly it dawns on them, they’re no longer lepers, and realize their incurable disease has been cured. Such a wonderful picture of God’s grace and power, receiving way more than they expected or imagined. The next scene is the core of the story and message. They have all had that terrible disease miraculously cured, and in keeping with Leviticus rules of ritual, nine of them continue on their way, obeying their religious duty as instructed. But one of the lepers does something different,

Luke 17:15-16

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

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This is where we drop ourselves into the story, and ask, based on my understanding of the nature of God, am I more likely to be, one of the nine who go on to the priest at the Temple, or would I be the one who rushes back to Jesus, praising and thanking God? Would the Lord as I envision God be more pleased by my adherence to religious ritual, tradition and practice, or my thanksgiving and gratitude, my worship and praise? This story helps focus our attention on the gap between an OT perspective, purity through priestly ritual, and a NT perspective, grace freely given in Christ.

Now all 10 lepers were healed, but only one of them returns, praising & thanking the Lord, and recognizing that through Christ, God has healed him, he turns back toward Jesus, to praise and worship God. That phrase, “turned back” is a very important theological term. In the Greek, it’s the same word as “repent”, which literally means, “to change your direction.” This Samaritan turns back from the way of priestly rituals, to praise God, as he bows down at the feet of Jesus. He recognized that God has cured him through Jesus Christ, and he is focused more on the giver and not just the gift. That makes this a salvation story ending with Jesus saying,

Luke 17:19

“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

The Greek word translated as “made well” is more frequently translated as “saved” or “salvation.” It means to be made whole, or to be restored as God intends and is way more than just being cured of the disease. A better translation is “through faith you have been made whole.” The Samaritan’s gratitude is a sure sign of faith, a relationship with God characterized by joy & thanksgiving, that comes from recognizing what God has done and is doing. Do you also hear and do you recognize the familiar themes that run throughout the life and ministry of Jesus Christ? about God’s gracious love for the outcast and sinner? beyond just religious rituals, tradition and rules, the focus is on grace, on our relationship with God... which is highlighted in

Luke 17:17

Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Where are the others?”

Following the OT purity rituals! Yes they all received mercy, their leprosy was cured, but they didn’t all recognize God at hand or the grace. The difference is that one noticed Jesus and what he had done, and falling to his feet in worship and gratitude, he is made whole and not just physically healed. That same difference in recognizing God present or not, led to the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities the struggle over OT religious purity and rituals, and that some will refuse and won’t accept God’s truth and grace as Jesus revealed. Failing to notice and express a sense of gratitude toward God is a sure sign and symptom of a life view and perspective that is not aware, or does not choose to recognize, God’s work and activity in blessing our world. This story is a grace and salvation story that parallels the gracious mission of Jesus Christ.

Theologically, this story is a foretaste of what Jesus was going to accomplish in Jerusalem for us, and a foretaste of the promised Kingdom of God’s grace. So, how does this Luke 17 story speak to us, apply to us today? This story highlights two distinct understandings of God one of human obligation and righteous performance necessary to satisfy God’s requirements & demands, or a God whose grace and healing comes first to whom we respond with gratitude, worship & praise, and by living worthily of what we’ve been given. Martin Luther wrote that this 10th leper exemplifies Christian worship, that it is not an obligation, demand or duty, but the natural inclination & faithful response of a thankful heart to its source of healing. This Luke 17 story teaches us about noticing and recognizing the gracious works of God continuously going on all around us and that if we do, then gratitude will naturally follow... which suggests that the level of my sense of gratitude may be a reasonable indicator of my spiritual health &

faith-walk. As Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out, if the stars only appeared just one night in a thousand years, we would stay up all night to see and appreciate them, and tell our children about them for generations. But since we see the stars most nights, we barely look up, or even notice, appreciate or recognize the beauty and wonder of God's work all around us.

So those times when I am not feeling particularly grateful, it's certainly not that God's blessing have ceased to flow. But maybe I have gotten so focused on myself and what I want, that I ignore God's love for me and blessings in my life, which leaves very little room or cause for gratitude. Gratitude may in fact be the best measure of our spiritual health, because giving thanks shifts our focus off of ourselves and onto the faithfulness, love, and goodness of God... helping to counteract our tendency toward self-centeredness. Our gratitude, our efforts to thank God, make us so much more aware of the rich fullness of God's love, as we increasingly notice God's power and presence, and God's hand at work in our world and in our lives. I've learned that when I have had my tough times and struggled, my greatest help and strength has come through prayer, in particular, when I am feeling "unblessed" & alone, it helps me to start making a list of all the blessings from God I have received, writing down as many as my mind can conceive. I find that once you get started, it can go on for a very long time, and so far, I've never run out of blessings to write down and before long I began to feel better and closer, more encouraged, hopeful and ready to continue on... and that is the wonderful power of gratitude as we notice and appreciate the abundant blessings of God. So as a regular spiritual exercise and practice, I invite you from time to time, to write down as many blessings as you can... and let that sense of gratitude fill and guide your days. As the Psalmist wrote,

Psalms 103:1-2

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.