

Thanksgiving Eve 2017

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is in the no-man's land between Galilee and Samaria, a borderland that Jews would normally avoid. Yet, here comes Jesus just walking along through a space in which he technically doesn't belong reaching out to heal ten people, who also don't belong, who are struck with a skin disease that has cut them off from contact with the rest of their community. Since tomorrow is Thanksgiving, I can't help but wonder how you feel about all of this. Maybe you are asking yourself, "Is an account of people with a skin disease really the best thing to hear about before enjoying a big, festive meal? What could ten lepers possibly teach us this time of year, as we look forward to mashed potatoes, pumpkin pie, and cranberry sauce?" Well, I want to encourage you to hang in there with me because these ten people, and especially one in particular, actually do have a powerful lesson for us about what is at the heart of Thanksgiving, gratitude.

Let's go back to the text. Jesus is going through this sort of forbidden zone on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross, his death and resurrection. By now, the word of Jesus and his healings must have spread to everywhere because when these ten lepers, huddled outside the village's stone wall, safely at a distance from the people inside, see Jesus, they seem to know who he is, and they see their chance, at last. These ten people, struck with visible skin diseases, began to yell out to Jesus, saying, "Jesus! Master! Have mercy on us!"

Jesus sees this, and what does he do? He simply tells them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests". Wow, this is a loaded statement, even though we may not recognize it as such, but when these ten lepers hear it, they know exactly what it means. When you've been healed from a skin disease, you go to the priests to complete the process, so you can re-enter the community. So, when they hear this, what do they do? They obey Jesus.

To really get what happened, I want to invite you into the account even deeper for just a moment. So, let me weave a story about what I imagine happened.

The ten lepers have been crying out to Jesus for help. Then, he tells them to go show themselves to the priests. Hearing this, the ten lepers knew all the talk about Jesus being able to heal must be true. They obeyed Jesus. They trusted what he said, and as a group began to go on their way. As they took this step of faith and began to walk away, each one was healed. Where their skin was blemished and marked with sores, clear, whole skin took its place. As the group walked on, one of the men, with his head perpetually bowed low from his broken, isolated spirit, noticed that the skin on his feet was suddenly completely smooth. For the first time in what was years, he lifted his head with hope, eyes shining.

This man turned around, letting the others shuffle past him as they kept on their way. And this man began to praise God loudly, yelling. "I've been healed. Praise be to God the healer. Thanks be to God! I'm whole! I'm clean!"

While the other 9 could hear his shouts of joy, none of them turned around. They kept going, but this man didn't focus on that. He was staring at Jesus with rapt, adoration, and Jesus was looking at him, right in the eyes with compassion that he hadn't seen in anyone's face, ever.

Then, holding his hands up in praise, marveling as the sleeves of his robe fell down around his elbows revealing now perfect, olive brown skin, this man rushed to Jesus. He threw himself face down on the ground at Jesus' feet, not minding as a cloud of dust rose up around him. Jesus could hear him, uttering non-stop thank-yous loudly into the dirt. It didn't escape Jesus' notice that this man was an outsider, a Samaritan.

Jesus looked around, as he asked, “Weren’t ten people made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was not one of them able to come back and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

The Samaritan stayed at Jesus’ feet, thanking him still. Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you.”

And this healed man was grateful for this dramatic, miraculous healing, but what did it give him? It gave him the opportunity to live out an ordinary, everyday life. The life that the other 9 are rushing back to, instead of stopping to thank the One who healed them. Yes, this Samaritan man’s gratitude lies in many areas, but this is one of them, that this man is thankful because now he has a chance to rejoin his family and friends, now he has a chance to go and feast with others. So, we might easily get caught up in the miracle aspect of this, that the most faithful response to a miracle is to thank God, but we can’t lose sight of the fact that Jesus sends him back into the mix of everyday life when he says, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you”.

Do you see what is happening here? Nine of the ten who were healed trusted and obeyed Jesus. They immediately went to the priests, like Jesus said, which is remarkable. They responded with obedience, but only one of these people truly recognized his healing, where it was coming from, and stopped to express his gratitude to the one who healed him, who made him well, who saved him.

All ten had faith to obey Jesus, but only 1 had the faith to return praising and thanking God. The fault of the other 9 isn’t that they don’t see God at work in their healing, but that they don’t truly recognize Jesus.

Now, at this point maybe you’re thinking, “Okay, Emily, this all sounds nice, but God hasn’t healed me of leprosy. It’s been a long time since God has done anything big in my life that I need to give thanks for.”

Or “What about me? I’m still waiting for my miracle”.

I don’t want us to get so caught up in the miracle here that we think we should only thank God for big things in our lives. I don’t want us to get so caught up in the miracle that takes place for this man who was healed that we lose sight of the ordinary way that the healing happened. Jesus simply told the ten people to go present themselves to the priest, off they went, and they were healed. This was absolutely a miracle, but the one person who came back and thanked God looked down and noticed what Jesus was doing in his life. He recognized where God was working in his life and responded with thanks. It doesn’t take a miracle for us to do that.

Where is God at work in your life? In the midst of our everyday lives, the everyday lives that the other 9 healed people were rushing to get back to, the ordinary life that this healed man was so grateful to receive back... Where do we notice God at work?

And once we notice God’s work in our lives, what is our response? How do you find yourself responding to God?

I have to ask myself that. How am I responding to Jesus? When was the last time I thanked God for my life, for my faith for my salvation?

You see, faith in God includes thanking God. Trusting God includes gratitude that recognizes who Jesus is. Lest you think I’m giving you an order or a rule to follow and insisting that you must thank God or else, let’s be aware that our gratitude to God is possible because Jesus is with us now, just like he was there with this man healed of leprosy. Jesus is present in our lives as a community and as individuals. Jesus is present in your life. Our giving thanks to God is empowered by the Holy Spirit, who lives in us. Like this man was freed by Jesus, we are freed by

Jesus. Part of our life as a Christian is a rhythm of faith and gratitude that is possible because Jesus is a part of our daily lives.

So, keeping all of this in mind, I want you to consider one final thing. If we go back to the text, and look again at this healed man who is profusely thanking God, we find something interesting. The word for thanking that is used here is *euchariston*. Does that sound familiar? It's from the root *eucharisto*, eucharist. This is the same word that Jesus uses at the last supper, when he has taken the cup and given thanks. The eucharist, the Lord's supper, is the feast that we take part in when we gather together as the family of Christ. So, tonight as we gather for the Eucharist, before we join together for our big feast tomorrow, let us give thanks to God in our hearts as we take the bread and drink of the cup. Like the healed man in today's Gospel, your faith has saved you. So, let us join in this man's gratitude to Jesus. Let us take part in this thanksgiving, this *euchariston*, right here and now as we give thanks to God.

Here, this evening, let us celebrate our own thanksgiving with God, giving him gratitude that is empowered by our faith. And as Jesus told the healed man to "get up and go", to take his faith out into the world, let's carry our own sense of *eucharisto*, of thankfulness out with us tonight and into our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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