

“Where are the nine?”

Luke 17: 11-19

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

I once read a legend of a man who discovered the barn where Satan kept his seeds ready to be sown in the human heart; seeds which would choke out all that brings joy to our lives. He learned, on finding the seeds, that the seeds of discouragement were more numerous than others and that they could grow anywhere. When Satan was questioned, he reluctantly admitted that there was one place in which he could never get the seeds of discouragement to thrive. “And where is that?” asked the man. Satan replied sadly, “in the heart of a grateful man or woman.” This morning’s scripture reading is a classic story of gratitude. Gratitude is an attitude toward life and other people. When we are grateful there is no room in our hearts for anger, greed, or discouragement over the things we don’t have or have not accomplished. Gratitude is an attitude that acknowledges our blessings and recognizes the giver. It is the opposite of entitlement – believing that we somehow deserve more or better than other people.

Prayer for Understanding: Merciful God, from whom we have kept our distance, we seek you now, for we want to be healed of all that separates us from you and from each other. We want to be channels of your healing among those who are forgotten or alienated; those who suffer or have lost hope in the future. Implant your life giving and life changing word among us. Re-direct our focus in life and teach us anew the meaning of gratitude. Free us to live as Christ would have us to live. Amen.

Scripture Reading            Luke 17: 11-19

Gratitude is an attitude. And our attitudes towards life shape our experiences.

There was once a poor widow who had two sons. This widow's livelihood depended entirely upon her sons' meager little businesses. Every day she worried about their businesses. She fretted and hoped that they would do well.

One son sold umbrellas. So, the mother would wake in the morning and the first thing she would do was look to see if the sun was shining or if it looked like rain. If it was dark and cloudy, she would gleefully say, "Oh, he will surely sell umbrellas today!" But if the sun was shining, she would be miserable all day because no one would buy her son's umbrellas.

The widow's other son sold fans. Every morning the poor mother would arise and look at the skies. If the sun was hidden behind clouds and it looked like rain, she would get depressed and moan, "Nobody will buy fans today."

No matter what the weather was, this poor widow had something to fret about. If the sun was shining, she believed no one would buy umbrellas. If the it was cloudy, she believed no one would buy fans. With such an attitude she was bound to lose. Finally, after moaning and complaining to a friend, the friend replied, "Why you've got it all wrong, my dear. If the sun is shining, people will buy fans; if it rains, they'll buy umbrellas. You cannot lose; one of your sons will always be earning a living. From that point the poor widow's attitude changed and she was grateful for what she had rather than moaning about what she lacked.

In Luke's gospel we discover the story of the one leper who was grateful.

Leprosy was a dreaded but very common disease in Jesus' day; perhaps it was the cancer of Jesus' day. Leprosy was so common that lepers had a prescribed social role. The Old Testament book of Leviticus expends two whole chapters teaching priests how to diagnose diseases of the skin, how to pronounce lepers unclean, and how to perform rites of purification should they, in a rare event, be healed. There was no known cure for leprosy at that time. As for the leper, according to the book of Leviticus: "The one who has the disease shall wear

torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his lip and cry, “unclean, unclean”. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.” (Leviticus 13: 45, 46) Lepers were to be quarantined. Not only did you not want to be in close proximity to someone suffering from leprosy, but you also did not want to touch them. After living for 18 months during a pandemic, we can now imagine what it is like for someone living without ever feeling the touch of another human being.

When I was serving as Pastor of the Hillsborough Presbyterian Church, I volunteered to deliver Meals on Wheels. There was a young man on my list of deliveries. When I arrived at his home and walked up to his front door, there was a sign on the door alerting me to the fact that he was suffering from AIDS. This was about 25 years ago when we were not sure how contagious AIDS could be nor did we understand how to treat it. I have to admit that I was fearful when I knocked on his door. He shouted for me to come in and to place his meal next to the door. He was clearly dying; skeletal in appearance. I stood by the front door and visited with him for a minute. I will never forget the isolation in which that young man was living. A few weeks later, his name was no longer on my list for delivery of a meal.

Leprosy was not seen, however, as a punishment for sin. It was understood instead as an inexplicable act of God, which made it even more frightening. If

there was nothing you did to deserve leprosy, then there was nothing you could do to avoid it, and so lepers were shunned. Shunned because it was believed that their disease might be contagious. But even more importantly because no one wanted to catch their pain, their loneliness, their unspeakable fear, so they were kept at a distance, barred from the religious community and declared unworthy of God. They were unclean outsiders, not to be mistaken as having anything in common with the healthy insiders. They live over there – we live over here. We are not like them. God knows we feel sorry for them, but you have got to be sensible about these things.

None of this religious law which divide and separated was challenged by the lepers themselves. They could not work, after all, and they depended upon the charity of the insiders for their livelihood. So, they dressed as they were told, they spoke as they were told, and they did not cross over the line that had been drawn to separate them from those with unblemished skin. They followed orders and even when Jesus, that renowned healer of lepers, came to town they did not break rank. They stood at the proper distance and said the proper things: “Jesus, Master” – they recognized him and called him by his messianic title – “have mercy on us.” Jesus was their last hope and so they cried out to him.

And Jesus looked at them and saw what anyone could see, anyone with compassion that they were eaten up with leprosy and needed all the mercy they

could get. He did not touch them, he just ordered them to “go and show themselves to the priest.” And they did, disappearing as obediently as they had appeared in the first place.

None of them asked why they should go and show themselves to the priest, but there was really only one reason why they should – to receive a diagnosis, a verdict of clean or unclean, insider or outsider, member of the community or beggar living on the fringes of society. None of them asked why but they went and as they went, the scabs fell away, the color returned to their skin, the feeling came back into limbs that had been numb for years. And nine went on to live their lives as restored and healed members of their families and community.

But one did not do as he was told. One, when he knew he was healed, cried out, turned back, and did not rest until he lay on his face in the dirt at Jesus’ feet, praising God and giving thanks. And we are told that ten were healed, but only one was saved. Ten were declared clean and restored to society, but only one was said to have faith. Ten set out for Jerusalem to claim their free gifts, but only one turned back and gave himself to the Giver of the gift of life. Ten behaved like good lepers, but only one behaved like a man in love with his Savior and grateful, grateful for his life.

For the tenth leper, the giver’s love for him was more precious than the actual gift. And for this relationship, for this human and divine touch manifested

in Jesus Christ, the tenth leper expressed his spontaneous joy and gratitude. Somewhat like the woman with the extravagant oil which she poured all over Jesus' feet. Somewhat like Zacchaeus, who scuttled down a sycamore tree to dine with Jesus and during the table talk he was ready to give away half he owned. Somewhat like the widow who dropped her two pennies in the temple treasury. These folks all seem to understand, with gratitude, what Jesus meant in and to their lives.

“But where are the nine?” Jesus asks. Where indeed?

Maybe they felt entitled to their gift of healing. Entitlement; there is plenty of that going around these days.

Maybe they were resentful that they had suffered from the disease in the first place. Understandable.

Maybe, in their joy, they simply forgot to thank the giver.

Maybe they were finally too busy getting on with their lives and catching up with family and friends to return and give thanks.

Maybe they didn't want to return because the giver would expect that they care for the remaining diseased ones; it would be easier to simply forget the suffering instead of looking it in the face.

Maybe, maybe. We don't know what their excuses were – I think we know what our excuses are.

The giving of our time, resources and talents to God and the ministry of Jesus Christ is an act of gratitude. It is not an act motivated by guilt or obligation. Giving to God is an act of joy, reflecting our relationship with the one who has given so much to us. Jesus does not need to be thanked, but we need to be grateful. In being grateful we become connected to the giver of life. The power and blessings of God are present in our lives whether or not we acknowledge it. Are we, you and I, one of the nine or are we the one grateful person, willing to return to Jesus and express our gratitude?