

“20/20 Gratitude”

Luke 17:11-19

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It was the Sunday before Thanksgiving and the teacher asked the children to name one thing for which they were grateful. Parents, home and food were at the top of the list. When it came time for little Johnny to reply, he quickly said, “I am grateful for my eye glasses.” “Oh, the teacher replied, “You are thankful that you can see.” “No,” he said, “I am grateful for my glasses because they keep the girls from kissing me!”

According to Dr. Alan Culpepper, the act of seeing plays a vital role in this story. Before I tell you how, let me recap the story for you as Luke shares it.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem from Galilee when they came across a group of men who had leprosy. Notice how Luke described them, not as lepers, but as men who had leprosy. This was not uncommon for him. Earlier, he wrote about a man who was paralyzed rather than a paralytic and a man who had demons, not a demoniac. Maybe this was because Luke was a physician and knew how people suffered with low self-esteem when they were sick. He wanted to protect their dignity and worth and did his part by treating them with respect when he wrote about them.

According to ancient law, these men were supposed to keep their distance from approaching people and shout, “Unclean! Unclean!” Perhaps they kept their distance, but that did not keep them from crying out for help. In unison they shouted, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Luke records that when Jesus saw them, he told them to go show themselves to the priest so they could get a certificate of healing. Doing this would make it possible for them to be reunited with their families and reintegrated into society. They did as he instructed and were healed.

It is at this point in the story that something unusual happened. One returned to Jesus when he saw that he had been healed. He went back so that he could praise God for his healing and thank Jesus for his kindness. It just so happened that this man was a Samaritan, not a Jew as the other nine were.

Jesus appeared to have been surprised that only one returned. “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

The unanswered questions gave way to Jesus’ affirmation of the Samaritan’s profound yet humble faith. “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

Is this a story about faith and healing? Gratitude or ingratitude? Acceptance or rejection? Yes. It is about all of these issues and others because most stories have multiple levels of meaning. This one certainly does. However, there seems to be one part of the story that connects all these ideas. Look at it with me this morning.

As I said earlier, Dr. Culpepper believes the act of seeing plays a vital role in this story. Jesus saw the men with leprosy and responded to their needs, in contrast to the priest and Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan who saw the man lying in a ditch but did nothing to help. One man, a Samaritan, saw the gift of grace that he had received and returned to thank Jesus. He also saw the connection between Jesus and God and praised God that he had been healed. Finally, Jesus saw this man’s remarkable faith, grounded in humility and gratitude, and gave him something the other nine did not receive, the gift of salvation.

Sight is a crucial element in this story and important part of faith, isn’t it? For many, it is a metaphor for redemption. One of our favorite hymns reminds us of this each time we sing it.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!

*I once was lost, but now am found. **Was blind but now I see.***

Rabbi Harold Kushner says that sight has always been an important element of our faith. He believes that religion is a way of seeing.

It appears that Luke wants us to ponder this based upon the way he wrote this story. I can almost hear him asking us: What do you see along your journey and how do you respond? Perhaps we need to answer these questions this morning.

What do you see today as the attention shifts from this story to your own? *Do you see the people who came to your aid when you needed them most?* Do you see those who heard your cry for help and reached out to you when others passed you by? Do you see the people who befriended you when others judged and condemned you?

How have you responded to their acts of kindness? Have you thanked them and told them about the difference they made in your life? Is this something you could do this week as a way of preparing for Thanksgiving?

Do you see the people who blazed the trail on which you travel? Whose sacrifices made it possible for you to be where you are? On whose shoulders are you standing? Have you told them how grateful you are for their help and encouragement?

When the Samaritan returned to Jesus to thank him for his healing, Luke wrote that he fell at Jesus' feet. This was the normal posture of someone desperately begging for help and pleading for mercy. Evidently the Samaritan's gratitude was as strong as his need to be healed, and I don't doubt that it was.

Culpepper sees gratitude as perhaps the purest measure of a person's character and spiritual condition. "A grateful person reveals humility of spirit and sensitivity to love expressed by life itself, good health, friendship of others and the love of family," he writes. "A grateful person does not overlook or take for granted kind deeds and gifts that need to be valued, treasured and appreciated."

Do you see the people who need your help today? I wonder who the lepers are in our society who feel unworthy of associating with respectable folk. What have they done to be shunned and abandoned? What is it like to have no one to soothe open wounds and take away the pain? What does it feel like to have no safe place to fall after making mistakes or being a victim of others' bad decisions? Do you hear their cries for help? Do you see the people who suffer in silence and have given up hope that anyone will care? Do you see what you are doing to contribute to their plight or what you are not doing to alleviate their suffering?

What difference could you make in the lives of those who are struggling? Could you be their priest and God's instrument of grace and peace? Do you see the gifts you possess to make this happen?

While I feel certain the Samaritan returned to Jesus with a grateful heart, I am also aware that he may have had no priest to go to as Jesus instructed him to do. As a Samaritan, he could not go with the other nine to a rabbi. Where could he go to praise God and receive the certificate of cleansing? Luke seems to imply that he had no one available. Perhaps this is one reason he returned to find Jesus. In doing so, he went to the only priest he knew.

Could you be the only priest someone knows? "Every member a minister," is our motto at Smoke Rise. You can be someone's priest this week as much as any staff member. How? Do what Jesus did. Stop. Look. Listen. Encourage. Help. Love. Share. Do your part to create a just world where their cries for help are heard and taken seriously.

Be the presence of Christ. You can do it as well as anyone, and when you do, I think you will discover what Jesus meant in his final words to this grateful man. "Go on your way; your faith has made you whole."