

“Please and Thank You”
Text: Luke 17:11-19
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Morningside Presbyterian Church
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“He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.”
Luke 17:16

Those of you who teach our children know that this morning’s scripture from the gospel of Luke is a popular one in children’s Sunday school curricula. Like Noah’s Ark, Jonah and the Whale, and the Feeding of the Five Thousand, this little vignette is captivating and it contains a tidy, comprehensive moral lesson. We adults are always trying to teach children the importance of saying please and thank you, and this passage has both. Ten lepers (unclean, outcast, visually offensive, despised and rejected by the community of faith) come to Jesus with a request: Please have mercy on us. Okay, they don’t actually say “please” but the connotation is there, and we are always permitted some liberty when interpreting these stories for our children. The lepers call out, begging to be made clean and healed from their disease.

And here is the first Sunday school lesson: We should say please when asking for something. This is an easy one for our children to grasp, because it consistently results in a positive outcome for the child. “What do you say?” we ask. “Please!” the response is almost automatic. And a positive outcome quickly follows. The choice to say “please” is concretely rewarded. I get what I want.

So it is with the ten lepers in the gospel of Luke. Aware of the distance that they must keep from clean society, they stand far off, and beg for Jesus to have mercy on them. Theirs is an appropriate and polite request, and Jesus responds by sending them to present themselves to the priests, the only way that they could be restored to the religious and social community. All ten lepers are restored, rewarded for their faithfulness and for having the strength to ask Jesus to be healed. It is easy to see why saying please is so important. The lepers get what they want.

The story might have ended there, and many of Jesus’ healing miracles do, with the healed or forgiven one returning to the normalcy of life, as they once knew it. Nine of the lepers are halfway home when we learn that one of them turns back to offer both praise and gratitude.

This is Sunday school lesson number two: we explain to our children that this one healed and restored Samaritan leper did the right thing by choosing to return to Jesus and say thank you. We too should thank Jesus for the many blessings in our lives and we should thank others as well. It is certainly a good lesson for our children, and for all of us. Remember to say thank you when something good happens or when someone has given you a gift. It is the polite and appropriate thing to do.

You may have sensed my suspicion that politeness and appropriate etiquette are not the primary lessons for us in this passage, as convenient as that may be for those who teach manners. The tenth leper is not praised or remembered for impeccable manners, but for spontaneous, unexpected gratitude. It is an impulsive moment of unrestrained joy that leads him back into the presence of Jesus and sets him apart from the other nine. His actions are extreme, even impertinent and impolite. For a Samaritan to approach a Jew, with gratitude? For him to praise the God of Israel aloud? For this Samaritan to kneel down at Jesus' feet? This is no order from Miss Manners; this is uninhibited gratitude flowing from the life of a healed and restored man.

I witnessed that same depth of gratitude this week when I visited with the members of our church who made the trip to Port-au-Prince. Morningside, be proud; you were represented well by these fourteen sisters and brothers. On Monday evening, Amy DeBaets led the daily devotional and she began by reading this passage from the gospel of Luke. Members of the group shared their reflections on the passage and on their gratitude for the opportunity to visit Haiti, connect with new friends, and witness firsthand the powerful ministry of the St. Joseph's Family. But the conversation quickly shifted to the incredible gratitude that we felt within the community of orphaned and abandoned boys in St. Joseph's. Many of the boys who live there would not be alive without this ministry. Aware of that, they live graced lives of gratitude. And out of that gratitude flows hospitality and kindness and generosity and welcome to the stranger, even to us.

Each night, the boys hold a chapel service on the roof of their temporary building; the home was completely destroyed in January's earthquake. The service begins the same way as it has for two decades, with a ritual of "Bravos." Here is how it works: someone begins and says, "Bravo to Walnes for sharing his shoes with me today." Two others in the circle add their notes of bravo for Walnes, then everyone applauds and Walnes chooses someone else to honor. "Bravo to Tony for working hard in the pit." When we joined the community for chapel, we were expected to participate in this remarkable ritual of honoring and being honored. The line between Haitian and American disintegrated and every person in the circle was affirmed, celebrated, thanked, and loved. What a powerful witness to the force that gratitude can be in our church and in our community.

The capacity for unbridled gratitude is a sure sign of wellbeing. I have never known a truly grateful person who is small-minded or unkind or overly anxious. To live with gratitude for the small things realigns our perspective on the big things. To see others who live with gratitude to God re-centers our focus on the one who is the source and giver of every gift.

There are always a million reasons to let despair overshadow gratitude in our lives and in our world. I imagine that the nine lepers who did not return to offer thanks were preoccupied with other causes of unhappiness and isolation. They could not give thanks because everything was not "just right." We can live that way, beginning each day with fear over what bad news may come, what challenges must be met, what pain might await us.

Or we can let gratitude win, let it overtake and overwhelm us. We can choose gratitude even when the light is dim and hope is distant. We can be grateful even, perhaps especially, in the midst of crisis. We can choose gratitude. The one who returns to Jesus is given the greatest gift of all, a thankful heart.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul makes an unusual demand: "Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Give thanks in all circumstances. *Before I spent two days in Haiti this week, I wrote this line:* Leave it to Paul to require the impossible of his churches. And then I returned to an impoverished nation where the overwhelming challenges of daily life somehow got even harder in January of this year. I saw piles of rubble and temporary tent cities and hungry children wandering aimlessly through busy streets. This tragic poverty is not perversely romanticized in Haiti, and we should also resist that urge. The nation is devastated.

But on Wednesday morning, I rose early and went to the roof to pray and journal. No sooner had I taken a seat than I heard faint sounds of song from a church across the street. I walked downstairs and across the street to find dozens of young children, in school uniforms, singing songs of praise before school. After a few minutes, I recognized one, and joined in: "Rise and Shine and Give God the glory." In a place where rising and shining are constant challenges, giving God the glory is quite natural. Give thanks to God in all circumstances. Especially with song.

The gift of music that is rich and deep and powerful has blessed this congregation with reason for gratitude for two decades. One of the great gifts that you, Walter, and this remarkable choir, give to us is a reason for celebration and appreciation. But beyond that, the beauty of this music (like all true beauty) points beyond itself to the source of all gifts. It lifts us up and gives us a sense of the majesty and glory of God. When we experience this transforming transcendence, our response is inevitably gratitude. All words fail us, except those profoundly simple ones too often neglected by children and adults alike: Thank you. Amen.