

Where Are The Others?
Luke 17:11-19
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I think perhaps the most thankless task in the world is to serve on a Presbytery committee.

Now, if you're new to Presbyterianism, let me tell you that we had something of a love-affair with committees in the 1950's and we just have never gotten over it. We had committees for everything. We're getting better, mind you. Now we have ministry teams, but they're really just committees in disguise. If someone asks you to join their ministry team, don't be fooled, it's a committee - join it anyway. That's how all the work gets done in a church – good volunteers doing something they care about.)

Jokes about committee work aside, I really do believe that the church works better when we all work together and there are some presbytery committees that do some incredible work, like planting churches and building playgrounds and helping churches heal.

And once upon a time, I was on one.

I have served three terms on a committee called, “The Committee on Ministry” in various presbyteries. It's the oversight committee. It's supposed to make sure that churches are doing well, and that the pastors and the congregations are working together.

It is the most thankless job you can imagine. I used to come into my office and my assistant, seeing me in a foul temper, would say, “I see you've been at the Presbytery.”

We had to go visit sessions to make sure that they are functioning well. And from time to time, we had to get involved.

One time, I had to chair what we officially call an “administrative commission.” It is exactly as thrilling as it sounds. We were called to go and try to bring peace to a congregation that had become terribly embattled.

When we got there, we found it was a disaster area.

One of the elders wailed in a session meeting as I came in the door, “We know you’ve come to shut us down!”

Which of course, we hadn’t.

One of our volunteers, an elder at another Presbyterian church, was an accountant and slowly but surely, their books were brought together and began to make sense.

I took over as the moderator of their session and I set standards for acceptable behavior.

Members of the commission showed up, month after month, to walk alongside the session as they made hard decisions.

A retired minister came over to preach for them until they could find a supply preacher to fill their pulpit.

And slowly, gradually, the congregation began to become less anxious. They regained their confidence and knew that they could once more do what they did well. And eventually, we knew the church could come out of intensive care. So we said our goodbyes and told them we would pray for them.

This happens all the time, and generally, the process is the same.

And we were pretty much never thanked for it.

But one day, as we started our meeting, the chair said, “We’ve had correspondence from this church where you chaired that commission.”

The whole committee sat up straight. We were just sure the wheels had come off the bus.

The Chair continued, “They have written to invite us to come to lunch. They want to host our December meeting. They want us to see how well they are doing and to tell us thank you for helping them with their healing.”

Our jaws hit the floor.

It is so important to say, “Thank you,” sometimes, don’t you think?

Another time, I was in a committee meeting at a church, a Christian Education Committee meeting, to be exact, and we reached the end of the year and we knew we needed to thank our Sunday School teachers who had tirelessly taught the children of the church and we wanted to give them a thank you gift.

We thought through various ideas of liturgical junk we could give them, realized that our budget wouldn’t really permit us to give anything of much value.

And then someone said, “Well, we could just *tell* them “thank you.”

And so I added, “Well, why don’t we write them notes. Each one of us can take a teacher and write a thank you note, you know the old fashioned kind, on stationery.”

So we did that. We divided up the classes and each of us wrote a thank you note.

A few weeks later, one of the teachers came up to a member of the committee and said, “I’ve been teaching Sunday School for years, and for years the church has given me a gift to say thank you. But I think this may be the first time in all of those years when a parent of one of my students has written me to say how much it means to them to know that as they drop off their child they know that they are doing something profoundly important and that they are being supported by their church family.

It is important to say thank you.

But you already know that, don’t you?

Still, it is interesting, isn't it that Jesus makes note of the one leper who returns.

Ten are healed; one returns giving thanks.

While stories of healing strike us naturally as miraculous, but as miracle stories go this one is fairly run of the mill.

There are ten lepers.

Leprosy was as dangerous and unpleasant then as it is now, but even more, because the term could be a catch all for any skin condition that worried folks.

There's no medicine in the modern sense, skin conditions are supremely visible, and so those who don't want to catch it demand that those who have it stay away.

Pretty straightforward. Leper colonies formed to be places where those who were pushed away from the embrace of the community could find some solace in being together.

And I probably don't need to remind you that disease and infirmity in the first century were generally considered to markers that one was unclean.

Uncleanness was not a medical condition, it was an ecclesiastical condition.

Medical conditions could be cured by nature and the physician, but only the priest could give an ecclesiastical cure – only a priest could declare that the one who had been excluded could once more now be included.

So ten were healed. Ten went, as instructed by Jesus, to show themselves to the priest and be restored to community.

For ten people rejection was met with mercy. Exclusion was followed by inclusion.

As miracles go, it's pretty unremarkable. Jesus didn't even have to do anything. He just said a few words and presto, it was done.

But then that tenth fellow comes back – and he is a Samaritan.

And Jesus says the strangest thing to him; your faith has made you well.

Except that's not exactly what he said to him. The word means, "saved you."

"Your faith as saved you," said Jesus to the leper.

The Samaritan leper was doubly excluded. Being a Samaritan placed him outside of God's people.

But not to Jesus.

Not to Jesus. For Jesus, God's people are always those who "get it". There's not a magical formula for in and out when it comes to the kingdom of God. It's those who recognize what Jesus is up to who express what God is about.

And it seems that the expression of gratitude is that which God sees as pleasing.

It is the expression of gratitude, of returning and recognizing that God's grace has hit its mark that causes Jesus to stop and take note.

Now, I won't put too fine a point on it, but we're in commitment season. So for the next eight weeks, your friends and family will be telling you a little bit about what their faith means to them. They will be telling you what their faith community means to them.

They will be telling you what this family of faith means to them.

I love that. I absolutely love it because it is where faith meets practice.

Indeed, gratitude is always where faith meets practice.

You see, I think that is the heart of what Jesus is saying when he asks, "Where are the others?"

Gratitude is more than mere verbal expression. It is a way of life.

When the way that we live matches up with the words that we say, it is a saving grace.

It changes the way we see things. It changes the way we live as grace is in our lives and shapes our living.

Interestingly, though, nowhere does Jesus reject those whose gratitude is not evident.

Nowhere do we read that their diseases returned. It is simply that the one whose gratitude is clear is remarked as having faith that heals.

You may be wondering whether this means that a person has to acknowledge Jesus to find salvation.

That doesn't appear to be what Jesus is saying. He is just saying what a difference it makes when we do.

What a difference indeed.

I love the way that Anne Lamott puts it in her new book, Help, Thanks, Wow, the three essential prayers.

She writes, "the movement of grace toward gratitude brings us from the package of self-obsessed madness to a spiritual awakening. Gratitude is peace.

Maybe you won't always get from being a brat to noticing that it is an e.e. cummings morning out the window. But some days you will. You will go from being Doug or Wendy Whiner, with all your psychic diverticulitis, able to eat only macaroni and cheese, to remembering 'i thank You God for this most amazing / day.'"¹

Now mind you, I do not always personally achieve this.

It is not always easy to go around feeling grateful all the time.

Gratitude is a way of life but there are moments when you just don't feel so grateful.

¹ Anne Lamott, Help, Thanks, Wow, the three essential prayers. Riverhead Books, NY, 2012. P65

Not too long ago, I started off having a great day – it was a Friday, which is my day off, so I had plenty of time to do things I needed to do. I went to my gym and had a swim, which made me even more relaxed. As I walked out to my car, I notice the bumper didn't quite look right. I got closer and I could see that the paint was scratched off and the bumper was bowed up in the middle.

And I said a bad word.

Just as I finished saying the bad word, a couple of cars down, the window rolled down, and someone said, "I'm glad to know that my pastor knows that word."

I laughed, and said, "Well, did you see who did it?"

"No," he replied, "I just got here."

So I said the bad word again.

But I was grateful for the laugh, and for the presence of my church family. It was the most mundane thing in the world, but it made something just a little bit better. And I was grateful.

Sometimes into our lives a little spiritual leprosy falls. Bad things happen. Life gets tough.

But the grace of God says that it doesn't have to stay that way.

And once we know that, once we live that, all the rest of life can be gratitude.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.