

Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers

Twenty Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 17:11-19

Today's gospel reading focuses our attention on the power of gratitude. Throughout the Scripture, gratitude is presented as a central part of our walk with God. Just a few examples will suffice to show this: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him; bless his name" (Ps 100:4-5). "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts to which you were called; and be thankful" (Col 3:15). "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us" (1 Thes 5:18).

Why, though, is gratitude so important? What good does it do to be thankful? One answer might be that being thankful is a healthy psychological state of mind. When you put yourself in a state of gratitude, you are able to better cope with difficult situations, better engage other people, and feel more positive about yourself and about your life. Much has been written within the mindfulness movement on the positive impacts of thankfulness for one's well-being. While not denying these positive impacts, this answer alone would fall tragically short of the Christian view of gratitude. From the Christian point of view, gratitude is fundamentally about connection with others. It's about relationships, and most fundamentally, it's about our relationship with God.

In our gospel reading for today, the story centers on an encounter between Jesus and 10 lepers. When Jesus walks into a village, 10 lepers call out to him for "pity." Let us pause here to appreciate that being a leper meant much more than just having a physical ailment. Being a leper also carried social and religious ramifications, since having leprosy marked one in a state of ritual uncleanness and necessitated the leper being a social outcast. Notice the lepers were "standing at a distance"; they were quarantined off from normal social interactions. Also notice Jesus sends them to the priest as their problem, ultimately, is a ritual and ceremonial one. But as they make their way to the priest, they become healed. All 10 of them become healed.

But at this point, the story begins to focus on one particular leper. Unlike the other lepers, this leper, when realizing he has been healed, stops in his tracks, turns around, and starts heading back to Jesus. What the leper does next is key to the story: he began glorifying God, fell at the feet of Jesus, and thanked him. It is this act of thanksgiving that Jesus lifts up as setting apart this leper from others. Jesus comments, "Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?"

Then Jesus concludes with a profound statement that gets to the heart of gratitude. He says, “Stand up and go; your *faith* has saved you.” When Jesus refers to “faith,” he is not speaking of a merely intellectual act of believing. Faith is deeper than that; having faith in God refers to a holistic connection to God, relating not only to the mind but to the will and emotions. Ultimately faith is about our *relationship* to God. So when Jesus looks at the leper and highlights his gratitude, and then connects that gratitude to his faith, Jesus reveals that at the center of relationship with God is gratitude.

This makes sense. Gratitude is the means of circling the loop between giver and receiver. Gratitude deepens the gift-giving activity by uniting giver and receiver in a more profound way than if the gift giving went in just one direction: giver to receiver. The giver doesn’t necessarily give because he wants to be thanked; the giver could give out of pure generosity. Gratitude is about the receiver. Without gratitude, the receiver becomes disconnected to the giver. The receiver may enjoy the gift but fail to see the giver in the gift. They fail to see the gift as a way of deepening relationship with the giver. A receiver who fails to give thanks to the giver demonstrates a level of disinterest in the giver. Instead, the focus is on the gift.

This leads us to reflect: how often are we the nine lepers? How often do we ask things from God, but when the gifts come, we run off to enjoy the gifts and fail to return back to the Giver and give thanks? When we really think about it, are we actually more interested in the gift than the Giver? Do we merely want the gifts of God, or do we also want the God of the gifts? Jesus teaches us that our faith in God is not necessarily revealed by our asking things of God. Rather, our faith is actually revealed in our gratitude to God. If we don’t return to give thanks, we cut ourselves off from the true source of our joy and peace, which is God himself, and we try to make the gifts do what only God can do: satisfy our desires. If we do not circle the loop, we miss out on experiencing the profound happiness of deep relationship with God. Let us therefore strive to see the gifts given to us by God, and then let us ask the Spirit to fill our hearts with gratitude to God and experience the joy of relationship with God.