

"Returning Thanks"

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*11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."
(Luke 17:11-19)*

The second week of the month is the most challenging week in my schedule. It is the week that the proverbial meeting planets align and each day of the week is full of numerous committee meetings, presbytery meetings, and the monthly session meeting. It's the week where Chris and I wave at each other as we pass like ships in the night, resorting to facetime to see each other during dinner. This week was that week and with the cold temperatures and rain and this unwelcome bout of illness, it just wasn't feeling like my week. I could also add that this week was also balanced with the oncoming joyful stress of Thanksgiving, which granted is one of my favorite holidays, but I have spent the week asking myself what crazy notion prompted me to volunteer to be the host for my family this year. In just a few days' time my mother and her sisters with their families will descend upon us and my once homey kitchen will turn into something comparable to Chef Gordon Ramsey's TV show Hell's Kitchen. The stakes are high from food prep to plating. Flames shoot up from stove tops! Commands are spoken with such authority it would make a navy Lieutenant blush! The best response if requested to do a task is to simply respond, "Yes Chef" and not to make eye contact.

But I digress, all this to say, it's been a full week. Maybe you have had a week like that recently. Maybe you too are feeling a little tired, a little worn out, a little anxious about family coming to visit, or lack of family to visit. Maybe you too are looking forward to a couple of days for rest and anticipated relaxation. I should also add, that this past week had another item added to the calendar, one that has been newly part of my duties these last couple of months. I've gotten to put on the "Pastor Rachel" hat for preschool chapel time for First Kids Preschool, and the second week of each month I get to start my Tuesday and Wednesday mornings with their classes. This week, we talked about how God gives us many gifts and ways that we are called to say thank you to God. They shared that they were thankful for things like their friends, their teachers, the playground, their toys, their cats and dogs, the food that they eat. They also shared their thankfulness for their family, for God and for Jesus. If every day of the week started like this, it would be hard to complain. After sharing what we were thankful for, we talked about the ways that we could show our gratitude. Sometimes that can feel like an overwhelming task, so we broke up the parts of our day to say what we



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can do to show our thankfulness during the different times of day. Like when they are at school, our preschoolers said that they could say thank you, they could give someone a hug, they could share a toy, they could help clean up, they could share their snack. When they get home with their families, they could say something nice to their brother or sister. They could tell their parent that they love them, they could say the blessing or prayer at dinner. But I have to say my all-time favorite response came when we talked about ways we could share our thanks in the morning. There were the similar responses of saying the prayer at breakfast, or cleaning up their room. But one kid, who was exuberantly raising his hand and desperate to be called on, when picked said, you could dance. Yes, dance. And I think that child was spot-on and exactly right, sometimes, we have so many good things to be thankful for that we cannot help but dance. Maybe try that this coming week as part of your start of day routine and see how it might just change your outlook.

Dancing to show one's gratitude is biblical, just look to the Psalms for examples, but sometimes the simple act of turning around and walking can be an expression of gratitude, as seen in today's Gospel lesson. Once again, we find Jesus in a border region, crossing boundaries, both literally and metaphorically, wandering into places where he probably shouldn't go and stopping to heal people with which he should not interact by society's standards. The writer takes time to mention that Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. Those from the land of Samaria, as you might recall from the story of the Good Samaritan, were the enemies of the Jewish people. They were foreigners who surely could never get along. While the Galilean Jews and Samaria Jews were fairly similar on paper, in practice not at all, separated by different ancestors and claims on who had the true authentic Judaism, after returning from the Babylonian exile. This dispute of who was practicing the correct and authentic way was already five hundred years old and well entrenched by the time Jesus was preaching. So anytime we hear Samaria that is code in the Bible for an outsider.

And to take that level of inside/outside to the next stage, Jesus is approached by ten lepers. We can imagine that word of Jesus' healing has been spreading and it is enough to bring these lepers to cautiously approach. Lepers in that time were not just on the fringes of society, they were absolutely out of the picture. Considered unclean, they were pushed out of their families, out of their homes, out of their places of worship, out of their community. They have experienced a lifetime of isolation, disdain, and loneliness. Even when approaching Jesus, they keep their distance. Despite rumors of healing and welcome, they cannot assume that this Jesus would consider helping them, much less acknowledging them. They call out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

It must have come as a great shock to them that Jesus responded. Perhaps they thought he would do like others did when walking by, crossing over to the other side and making sure not to make eye contact. Or maybe they thought he would offer a prayer for them or peace to them and then be on his way. But instead Jesus says to them to go and show themselves to the priests. As they went on their way, they were made clean. They must have been excited to get on their ways. They would have needed the priests seal of approval to allow them back into society, to say that they were clean and could rejoin their community. They could go back to their homes, to their loved ones, and essentially live again. I can imagine that they were speed walking on to those priests, a spring in their step and a lightness in their hearts.

But one, our story says, stopped and turned around. Seeing he was clear from the sufferings of leprosy, he turned around and went back to Jesus. And there he fell at Jesus' feet, praising God and giving thanks. Jesus, after asking where the other nine were and why they weren't giving thanks, tells the newly healed Samaritan that his faith had made him well. And here we find ourselves at a fork in the road. One could, after reading this story, look at those nine healed lepers and say that they weren't fully healed, because they didn't stop and give thanks. But that wouldn't be the case. They still received healing, and really, they were doing exactly what Jesus told them to do, they went on to the priests. So, instead, we can focus on the one who did stop and give thanks, and was told that he was made well by Jesus. Thanksgiving is like that, you know, when its genuine, its spontaneous, sometimes even involuntary, because you recognize the great gift that you have been given and you cannot help but share your joy through thanksgiving. What we know from the language is the word that is used for well, when Jesus says, your faith has made you well, is the same word that means saved or whole. One of my seminary professors said, "Faith and gratitude are two words for the same thing: to practice gratitude is to practice faith. If faith is not something we have, but something we do- something we live- then in living we express our complete trust in God."¹ The Samaritan knows that he has been given a great gift, and in his turning back to say thanks, to express his faith, he is given a second gift, a blessing. In giving thanks for the gifts we are given, especially the ones that come from God, we are blessed all over again. When we take time to see and name all the good gifts God has given us, we become a people of faith who do not live into the false narrative of fear and scarcity, but the true story of abundance, mercy and grace. To live as a grateful people, we live with our eyes open, to see and notice all the wonderful gifts in our lives. It is our faith that stops us in our tracks, turns us around to remember to give thanks, and leads us back to praise God.

There is one such story about remembering to give thanks that is one those stories that is passed around the preacher campfires that and it tells of the Nelson family thanksgiving. Now thanksgiving was a big deal for the Nelson house. The family would gather from all over the country. Aunt Suzie would come with her famous pumpkin pie. The kids would come home from various schools and colleges bringing new boyfriends and girlfriends. Uncle Pat would always burn the sweet potato casserole, but nobody really would mind. The only event which the whole family dreaded was the toast by Uncle Mel around the Thanksgiving table. After the dinner plates were set, and the sweet tea poured, it would be time to go around the table and have everyone say that for which they were thankful. It was a purely ceremonious gesture, a long-standing tradition. Most would give a quick thanks for loved ones, or for being together. All except Uncle Mel. Uncle Mel would go on for minutes when it was his turn. The food would get cold, ice would melt in the glasses.

And so it happened like it happened every year, Uncle Mel, with many rolled eyes around him, started to give his speech of thankfulness. It started slow, almost rhythmic, with thanks for good weather and the clouds, migratory birds, duck season, and starry nights. This progressed into a speech about each person gathered around the table and what they meant to Uncle Mel. He went on to talk about friends he had lost along the way and even the way he was raised. The thanksgiving speech was well past seven minutes when there was visible shifting in chairs around the table, but the more other family members tried to rein him in by clearing their throat, he just kept on going! Uncle Mel's eyes were closed he seemed to be

¹ Bartlett, David, L. *Feasting on the Word: Year C*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 166.

in a trance, and then he launched full steam into giving thanks to God and for God. He started going through the whole birth story of Christ and a few of his miracles. Tears were streaming down his face at this point, and the napkin dabbing around his eyes was now soggy.

By the time Uncle Mel was giving thanks that Jesus had died on the cross, it was full on sobs. Finally he had to stop as his tears choked his words. The whole scene was more embarrassing and awkward than usual and nobody really knew what to do. They ignored it largely and the thanksgiving meal continued in an awkward small talk, and the occasion snuffle heard coming from Mel's chair.

After the meal when Uncle Mel had gone to bed, a few of the adults and children were sitting around a dwindling fire, many were generally displeased with the prior events. Some were upset with Mel that their food was cold, and Aunt Suzie said what everybody was thinking, "I can't believe he wouldn't be quiet! Making all of us wait, carrying on like that sobbing and crying, preaching at us like we had never heard of the Christmas story, or for that matter Easter, or even Jesus before!" There was a silence. Silence until little Ginny, no more than seven years old, spoke up and said in a tiny voice, "I think Uncle Mel has heard of Jesus and what he did, I think he cried because he just never forgot."

To live with gratitude means that our eyes are open to all the good gifts that are in our lives. To live with thanksgiving means that we surely cannot forget. In our seeing and remembering such blessings, we cannot help but stop and return thanks to God. For people of faith, gratitude is a verb, it's a way of living. Diana Butler Bass in her book *Grateful*, says that "Gratitude gives us a new story. It opens our eyes to see that every life is, in unique and dignified ways, graced; the lives of the poor, the castoffs, the sick, the jailed, the exiles, the abused, the forgotten as well as those in more comfortable physical circumstances. Gratitude calls us to sit together, to imagine the world as a table of hospitality. To feed one another. To feast, to dance in the streets. To know and celebrate abundance. Gratitude empowers us. It makes joy and love possible. It rearranges the way we see and experience what is all around us. Gratitude makes all things new. It transforms how we understand what is broken and gives us the ability to act more joyfully and with hope."² In the week ahead let us open our eyes in gratitude to see all the many gifts we have been given. Let us not forget to give thanks. May you be so overwhelmed with God's abundant love and grace that you are stopped in your tracks to return gratitude. Thanks be God for such gifts, that leads us to lift our voices in praise, or even to start the morning with dancing.

² Butler Bass, Diana. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. New York: Harper Collins, 2018, 186.