

“Just Say Thank You”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Luke 17:11-19

I imagine that most of us had that childhood experience where every request was followed by the question, “What do you say?” And then, once we received whatever it was we were seeking, our parents would follow-up with, “Now, what do you say?” Of course, this was our training in saying “Please” and “Thank you.” And if our parents were as successful as they probably wanted to be, the end result is that we now include “please” and “thank you” at all the appropriate times without even thinking about it. Yet, the problem with such rote practices is that the words can sort of lose their meaning because there is no true thought behind them. It’s almost as bad as if you just didn’t even say “thank you” at all.

I want to challenge us to live a life of gratitude. To frame our consideration of thanksgiving and gratitude as integral to our way of life, we have this healing story of the ten lepers from Luke’s gospel. I think this is one of the best stories in the gospels to show us the importance of gratitude in our lives. Ten lepers were healed from their skin disease, but only one, the Samaritan returned to give thanks to Christ. And when he did, true healing occurred, as Christ said, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.”

When I was in seminary, I received one of the greatest life lessons ever, though in a most unfortunate way. One of my classes had a required Saturday event that we had to attend. There was lots of grumbling amongst us. Some of us had to finish preparing to preach the next day at church. For some of us, Saturday was the one day to sleep in and stay in pajamas. We had to be on site early that Saturday. The professor, out of her own pocket brought in doughnuts and juice for all of us as a way to make the morning a bit easier. We all enjoyed the special treat that day, only to find out two days later that not a single person in the class had bothered to thank the professor for her generous gesture. This woman had left her home early and spent what must’ve been a considerable amount of her own money in order to give us a special treat on an early Saturday morning. And out of the large number of folks who enjoyed those doughnuts that morning, not a single one of us had bothered to say “thank you” to our teacher.

When the professor pointed this out to us a couple of days later, we quickly rushed to offer our thanks, but the damage was already done. It was too late.

But here's the thing that we have to consider today. How would our "thank you's" be different if our lives literally depended on what someone else did for us? In one respect, it's so easy for us to just throw out "thank you's" here and there and everywhere as we go about our day-to-day lives. By the same token, it's also quite easy for us to forget to say "thank you" from time to time when someone extends a nice gesture to us. But that changes quite a lot when our very life hangs in the balance and our well-being is in someone else's hands. Or, at least, it should change. What we see in our scripture reading this morning, though, is that gratitude is one of the most important aspects of a life of faith.

Our reading from Luke tells the story of ten lepers who were healed by Jesus. But the thing is, the story isn't really about the healing, that's more of a sidebar to the actual story, which is about the one leper who came back to Jesus to say "thanks." And even as we consider the gratitude expressed by this leper, what Jesus really wants to teach us is a lesson of faithful discipleship.

This healing story falls in Luke's gospel in the midst of an extended lesson on discipleship. And what we are to understand here is that to "have faith" is to live it, and to live it is to give thanks. It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith, being a faithful disciple—this is the sort of grateful faith that has made this man from Samaria truly well. Indeed, Jesus wants us to see that "faith" and "gratitude" are really 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 and offer all of our gratitude to God, the giver of all good things.

This can be difficult, though, can't it? Because not everything in our lives is good. And so then doubt creeps into the equation, and we begin to wonder how we can have faith in a good and generous God when things are going so badly. And maybe that's why those other nine lepers didn't return to Jesus to give thanks; perhaps they were doubting the God who had allowed them to be made ill and cast out in the first place. We've all been there, haven't we? A family member is taken away from us suddenly and tragically. Or we lose our job. Or a child is diagnosed with terminal cancer. And suddenly, it feels as if the foundation of our faith is ripped from beneath us.

But to that, Christ would say, you can still give thanks. That's what this story of the healing of the ten lepers (or should we say the one leper?) is all about. Of course, we consider that leper's healing, and we think, "Of course, he's grateful, he was healed, his life got better. That makes it easy to give thanks." But here's the thing, that one leper wasn't truly healed until he returned to give thanks to Christ. Only then did Jesus say, "Your faith has made you well." And here's the real lesson, faith can make us well too, even in the midst of pain and loss. Indeed, our faith may falter in such times, but to that Jesus says, in essence, be thankful anyway. Because there is yet much to thank God for, is there not?

We can be thankful for the family that still surrounds us. We can be thankful for the doctors and nurses who cared for our loved ones in their final moments, or who gave their all to help us through pain and on the way to healing after an accident or surgery or disease. We can be thankful for the church, and all who are a part of it, which supports us in the midst of tragedy.

And even when it's difficult to muster that sort of thankfulness, we can yet be thankful for the co-worker who bought our lunch last week, or the person who offered his place in line at the grocery store. We can be thankful for the roof over our heads, the clothes on our backs, and the food on our tables. Sometimes things may be so hopeless that we have to look in the most insignificant of places to find something for which to be thankful. But what Jesus wants us to know today is that, if we can do that, if we can express gratitude in even the smallest of ways, we will find ourselves on the road to true healing.

And isn't that what this journey of Christian discipleship is all about; seeking faith in all things, at all times, and in all places? The demands of the Christian life are great. And sometimes, perhaps often times, we do not think we are well enough equipped. But Jesus reminds us that in living out our faith—by giving thanks in all things—we are given all the faith that we require.

That means there is a lesson here for all of us; the healed and the sick, the delivered and the still bound, the successful and the out of work. If prayers of thanks are part of the soul's healing and deliverance, then the physical circumstances of the pray-er (the one praying to God) become less important. It is thanking that saves the grateful leper, and such thankfulness is possible for all in every circumstance. One person can give thanks for his pleasant experience, while another thanks God for bolstering her during hardship.

If we can practice gratitude with intention, it will change our lives. That's what we need to hear above all else. The ten lepers were healed by Jesus, but only the one leper who returned to give thanks was saved. We need to be deliberate about saying "thank you" every day. We certainly can't miss the opportunities that are right in front of us, like my seminary friends and I did, but we have to go even further than that. We have to seek out opportunities to say "thank you" to one another and especially to God. And we have to do that most especially when it feels as if there is nothing even worth giving thanks for.

Pastor Chuck Swindoll tells the story of a visit to a veteran's hospital. He says, "The day I arrived to visit, I saw a touching scene. This man had a young son, and during his confinement in the hospital, he had made a little wooden truck for his boy. Since the boy was not allowed to go into the ward and visit his father, an orderly had brought the gift down to the child, who was waiting in front of the hospital with his mother. The father was looking out of a fifth-floor window, anxiously watching his son unwrap the gift.

The little boy opened the package, and his eyes got wide when he saw that wonderful little truck. He hugged it to his chest. Meanwhile, the father was walking back and forth waving his arms behind the windowpane, trying to get his son's attention. The little boy put the truck down and reached up and hugged the orderly and thanked him for the truck. And all the while the frustrated father was going through these dramatic gestures, trying to say, 'It's me, son. I made the truck for you. I gave that to you. Look up here!' I could almost read his lips.

Finally the mother and the orderly turned the boy's attention up to that fifth-floor window. It was then the boy cried, 'Daddy! Oh, thank you! I miss you, Daddy! Come home, Daddy. Thank you for my truck.' And the father stood in the window with tears pouring down his cheeks."

How much like that child are we? How often do we pour our gratitude out to our waiting Father, who has so blessed us? Probably not often enough. God gives us all of himself, even his very own Son, and often we've never given to him even a word of thanks because we are too focused on ourselves and our problems. This story of the ten lepers reminds us that if our faith is genuine, we will never, ever cease thanking God for the many blessings of our lives!