

“Blessing Completed”

A sermon based on Luke 17:11-19
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
On Sunday, October 13th, 2019
By David Oliver-Holder

Are you ready for thanksgiving? I don't mean the celebration in November, though, I have to admit, I've already been thinking about ordering our locally raised turkey for this year's feast. No, I'm thinking of taking stock of all for which we can be thankful.

I think we certainly could use the change in perspective.ⁱ Recent days have presented plenty to worry or anger us. Impeachment investigations. The suddenly escalated conflict in northern Syria. Fires in California, and flooding along the northeast coast. Various arguments before the Supreme Court. The cost of healthcare still crushing for so many. The cost of rent putting the notion of home ownership beyond many. A once promising football season turned typical.

Some say all of this is lamentable, and rightly we should lament. Others say all this calls for justice. To the barricades for action, protest, resistance! And without doubt, lament, the cry for justice, and the call to action are justified and have their place at particular times.

But what about thanksgiving? Might thanksgiving be an appropriate and powerful response to times such as ours?ⁱⁱ

As we continue with Luke's Gospel today, we find Jesus traveling with the disciples along the border. As was his enraging habit, he was crossing boundaries, and not respecting long settled proprieties. Tradition was clear that a good Jew should not wander into Gentile territory, nor should an upright Jew, especially a wise teacher of the people, have anything to do with suspicious personages. The last thing a holy person should want is to become unclean.

So, for example, when you see, or smell, a leper approaching, you had better go the other way, or better yet, pick up some stones to drive the leper away. Jesus never worried about these kinds of cautions. And so, in today's passage he's traveling on another border, between Samaria and Galilee, when he encounters lepers, ten of them.

Once again, the disciples had to be extremely uneasy. Everything in them is telling them to run away. The lepers sense this, as they always do, and keep their distance. But they approach close enough to make their plea to Jesus. "Master, have mercy on us."

And he did. He said simply that they should go show themselves to the priests. Why would Jesus tell them to do that? Because that is what one would do if you had been healed.

The healed would present themselves to the priests, who would certify the healing, bless it, and then restore the person to full fellowship and participation in the life of the Temple and the synagogue. Jesus does not say that they have been healed, but he suggests that they will be. So it took more than a little bravery, and a great faith, for them to alter their course, and set out for the Temple. And along the way, they are healed.

It's wise to remember all of the ways Jesus healed. To some he said, "Be healed," and they were healed instantly. Others, Jesus touched with his hands. And to others, he simply gave directions that suggested healing, and the sufferers found themselves healed on the way. The ministry of Jesus was never one size fits all, one remedy for all ailments, one answer for every problem.

Luke suggests that the lepers weren't very far along the road when they realized that they had indeed been made well. We can well imagine the joy and relief. But Luke tells us that only one turned around to say thank you. In his joy, he runs all the way to Jesus this time, falls at the feet of Jesus and pours out his thanksgiving.

Now, before we continue, let's note a couple of things.ⁱⁱⁱ First, neither Luke nor Jesus say that the other nine did anything wrong. They continued on the way to see the priests, just as Jesus had told them to do, and we are left to assume that they were healed, too. In no way are they judged or condemned.

Second, we need to notice something important about the one who did turn around and come back to Jesus. He is recognized by Jesus, that he is the only one to return, that he is a foreigner, that when he knew he was healed, he wanted to say thank you. Jesus then blesses him a second time and sends him on his way. He is doubly blessed.

How? Well, the first blessing came with the healing, just like the other nine. “But also the blessing [came] from *recognizing* blessing and *giving thanks* -- the blessings, that is, of wholeness and even salvation.”^{iv} He is doubly blessed.

Have you ever noticed just how powerful it is not only to receive blessing but also to name it and give thanks for it? Maybe you're at dinner with family or friends, and it's one of those meals, prepared with love and served and eaten deliberately, where time just stops for a little while and you're all caught up and bound together by this nearly unfathomable sense of community and joy. And then you lean over to another, or maybe raise your glass in a toast, and say, "This is great. This time, this meal, you all. Thank you." And in seeing and giving thanks, the original blessing is somehow multiplied. You've been blessed a second time.^v

Or maybe you're walking at the Barnhart Prairie, or Meadowbrook Park with someone dear, as the sun sets in the west, and the moon rises in the east. And you say, “Wow. This is wonderful. I am so thankful that you are here to share it with me.”

Again, the blessing is multiplied. Haven't we all experienced this quality of thanksgiving? It's rooted in perception, our ability to see a blessing. And then it is completed by our articulation, giving voice to our gratitude for that blessing.

The blessings always gets multiplied when perception and articulation are combined. That's why thanksgiving, or gratitude, is so powerful. “[I]t frees us from fear, releases us from anxiety, and emboldens us to do more and dare more than we'd ever imagined.”^{vi}

Like that healed Samaritan. To return to a Jewish Rabbi, surrounded by edgy disciples, so that you can say thank you, that's boldness embodied. But that's what happens after a healing, after you've been restored, saved, after you feel like you really are a child of God again, whole, accepted, maybe even beautiful.

Maybe we can feel compassion for the other nine now, because they missed all of this. They were healed, just as Jesus said, but they missed the wholeness.

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Maybe at this point, you're thinking I've strayed way off topic. What about all of that worrisome stuff with which I began the sermon? Is the world, now, any less filled with trouble? No, all of that is still here.

But the point is this. The world is also filled with blessing.

Families that care for each other, colleagues who work hard and well, schools where teachers care about their [students] and students are eager to learn, a form of government that is far from perfect yet whose workers strive to make sure the important work still gets done, even though they may not get compensated, relief agencies that tend the afflicted, service people who regularly put their lives on the line at home and abroad, good neighbors who support one another, a community of faith where the word is preached and the life of faith nourished, and more.^{vii}

All of that is here, too. God's world is filled with blessings and challenges. Perhaps the question is how we face those challenges. Should we respond with resentment, accusations and bad faith? Seems to me that we already have a bumper crop of that.

Might we do better to respond out of thanksgiving? Remembering the 10th leper, his joy, his courage, can we go forth from this holy place as heralds of blessing, as bearers of words of gratitude? I suggest to you that if we do this, we will not only experience a blessing, but we will also offer a blessing, in a community and a world that really could use it.

This church has been a haven of blessing for many years. As we begin another stewardship drive today, take time to think about all of the ways this place has been a blessing to you, your family, and this community. Think of all of the saints who have embodied those blessings, and who did so when it was not easy, when they were tired, when it was a struggle to make ends meet.

Think of them, and remember that they were faithful because they had been blessed, because they wanted to be a blessing, and because they wanted this place to always be here as a place of blessings. Grace, salvation, healing, forgiveness, the sacraments, these are all mysteries, of which Paul said we are stewards. The saints who have gone before us here were faithful. May God help us to be faithful in our day, too. Amen.

^{i-vii} David Lose, "Second Blessing," at WorkingPreacher.org, October 7th, 2013.

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- ii Ibid.
 - iii Ibid.
 - iv Ibid.
 - v Ibid.
 - vi Ibid.
 - vii Ibid.