

“Overwhelmed by Gratitude”

Luke 17:11-19

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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His body was shaking with excitement. It was almost time for him to open his gifts. And patience can be hard to come by when you are three-years-old. But he waited as patiently as he could until it was time. And then he stripped the paper off piece by piece. When the gift had been revealed, he looked up and said, “It is just what I always wanted!”

Now, whether it was or not, didn’t matter at all in that moment...whether the toy would be played with until it was worn out or tossed aside the next day was of no consequence. That little three-year-old knew how to show gratitude.

And in today’s story, so did a Samaritan.

The story opens with a reminder that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. For about ten chapters in the Gospel of Luke, this is the setting. Jesus is traveling. But more than that, the significance of being “on the way to Jerusalem” means that we know he is on his way to the cross.

After all, Jerusalem is not only a place central to his Jewish faith, but becomes the place where he comes in great enough conflict with both religious and secular leaders, that Jesus’ life ends.

And during this journey toward Jerusalem, many scholars understand that Jesus’ teaching and healing, his compassion and commitment are all part of showing people what true discipleship looks like.

So on this day as he entered an unnamed village between the regions of Samaria and Galilee, he was approached by ten lepers. And let’s remember, for Biblical purposes, leprosy included a variety of skin diseases from things we today might consider quite manageable to things that were quite dire and lifelong. We aren’t given specifics about these ten other than that they fall under this umbrella category.

That also meant that along with others considered to be lepers, they were separated from healthy people, they were excluded from things like routine daily happenings and religious rituals. And they were so used to this system that the gospel writer tells us that when they approached Jesus, they didn’t come too close, instead even as they spoke, they kept their distance.

Reading this story has made me wonder if we have any new insights after 2 ½ years of COVID-19. After all, perhaps for many of us, this has been the first time we have had personal experience about things like quarantining and the importance of keeping what

we kindly call “social distance.” We have learned to listen for the best practices around quarantine and isolation, around masking and vaccinations, around air flow and traffic flow. And we are cautious and compassionate enough, that we have followed the COVID rules, even when we see others not doing so.

Perhaps this experience makes us a little more understanding when we think about the rules around leprosy - things like being separated from the general population, and having to have one’s healing confirmed by a rabbi, and needing to engage in a ritual before being returned to the general population. I’m sure more than one of you has awaited the coveted negative COVID test with an eagerness to return to your regular daily routine.

So, here are ten lepers. They seek out Jesus, because remember by this time he has healed enough people that word has gotten around. They seek him out and Luke tells us they say, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” And then, without even touching them, Jesus tells them to follow the rules...to go show themselves to the rabbi, because after all, it is the rabbi who will need to confirm their healing. And Luke writes, “And as they went, they were made clean” (Luke 17:14b, NRSV).

And, not to dismiss the power of healing, but it is at this point that the action really begins. Because while nine of them continue on their way to follow the rules and get the appropriate approvals, one leper returns to Jesus with gratitude and praise of God.

And that leper, who by the way is a Samaritan, is praised.

Let’s pause here for a reminder about what we know of Samaritans. Many centuries before Jesus, when the 12 tribes of Israel were divided into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom’s capital was Samaria, while the Southern Kingdom’s capital was Jerusalem. While both stories are told, we can recognize that the Bible tends to talk through the perspective of the Southern Kingdom, with the Davidic line on the throne and the place of Jerusalem being central.

So, Samaritans weren’t just *any* other people. Rather they were family. They were people with shared background. But, according to those the Bible continues to call the Jewish people, they were a people who were looked down upon because they had a different worshiping place and they had intermarried outside of the Hebrew people. And, as many know from personal experience, often conflicts within family are harder to get past than conflicts with strangers or acquaintances.

Therefore, when we hear Samaritans, we should note that these are people who are part Jewish, part Gentile, and who have largely been dismissed and rejected, who are treated as other.

So, not only does this story start with lepers - people who are separated because of medical conditions - but this story, as others in the Gospels do, celebrates the action and faith of a Samaritan, one who was not generally celebrated.

But here, Jesus celebrates the leper who came back, who recognized God as a source of healing, who just couldn't help but say thank you.

And, before we dismiss the other nine too quickly, let's remember that just because they didn't return doesn't mean they aren't grateful. Just because we don't see them worshipping at Jesus' feet doesn't mean they don't recognize God as the source of their healing.

Because again, friends, let's remember. They did what was asked. They followed the rules. They came to Jesus and asked for healing and he instructed them to go to the rabbi - to do what was expected. And in doing so, they were healed.

So, let's not dismiss them too quickly. Because, while whether we want to or not may be up for grabs, the reality is that with few exceptions, we can all follow the rules - we know how to do what is expected. In fact, many of us are good at it.

So, perhaps the question as we consider our own lives of discipleship, is whether we allow following the rules and doing the right thing the right away, to get in the way of living grateful lives.

What would it take for us to have the overwhelming gratitude of the Samaritan who returned to Jesus with abandon and praised God?

What would it take for us to allow joy to bubble up within us until it bubbled out like that three-year-old opening his gifts?

What would it take for us to allow ourselves to step outside the expectations and comfortable habits of our lives and our faith, and to sing and shout praises to God for all the wonderful gifts in our lives?

What does true discipleship look like? It's more than doing the right thing. It's about more than following the rules. It's about living from a place of joy and gratitude and praise. And it's about being willing to learn from the unexpected sources who teach us what deep gratitude is about. Amen.