

“Thank God”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 103:1-13

New Testament Lesson: Luke 17:11-19

Dr. Daniel E. Fountain was a medical missionary in Africa.¹ Thinking back on his travels, he recalls one day when the driver of the hospital’s pick-up truck noticed an elderly woman struggling along the road with a heavy load of firewood on her head. The driver stopped and offered to take the woman to her village. He helped her into the back of the truck and then loaded up the firewood. Driving down the road, he glanced in the rear-view mirror and was astonished to see the woman sitting in the back of the truck with the firewood back on top of her head!

Sometimes when we accept help from others, we still can’t let go of the need to do it ourselves. Why is it so hard to simply say thank you and recognize that the help of others is not something to be overlooked or ashamed of, but rather a gift from God.

In today’s Bible reading, only one of the 10 lepers healed by Jesus saw it as a gift from God. The others were happy to be healed, but felt no need to thank anyone. They just didn’t recognize their healing as a gift to be thankful for. But isn’t all of life a gift? Shouldn’t we be thankful for all that we have? Of course we should. But how often do we stop to think about the simple blessings in our lives, and to thank God for them? More often than not we receive without gratitude, get too busy to say “thank you,” overlook life’s blessings, take God for granted?

Gratitude starts by us realizing we are not the Creator and Sustainer of things but God is. The story in Luke today helps us remember that. It follows a familiar pattern of healing in the Bible.

First, the healer or helper appears, and then those in need. It always starts with Jesus coming on the scene. Never the other way around. “Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee,” says Luke. Then “10 lepers approached him,” and called out to him, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” This shows us that God is always out ahead of us in our need, if we would only recognize and accept the help being sent our way.

One day the boss called his favorite employee into his office. “Rob,” he said, “you’ve been with the company for a year now. You started off in the mailroom, one week later you were promoted to a sales position, one month after that you were promoted to district manager of the sales department, and just four short months later, you were promoted to vice-chairman.

¹ Health, the Bible and the Church (Wheaton, Ill.: Billy Graham Center, 1989), 100-101.

Now it's time for me to retire, and I want you to take over the company. What do you have to say to that?" "Thanks," said the employee. "Thanks?" the boss replied. "Thanks?! Is that all you can say?" "Okay, okay," the employee said. "Thanks, Dad." Thanks, Dad. Thank you, Father.

It's important to recognize and accept the help others, but it's even more important to recognize and accept that that help actually came from God, and then to pause and thank God, even in the midst of our busiest day.

The great thing about thanking God is that when we do stop to count our blessings, we gain access to an even greater blessing, the presence of mind to trust God in all things.

Here's how it worked out for the 10 lepers. Jesus told them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean." All 10 lepers made clean. All 10 lepers had faith enough to trust in the Lord, to trust that Jesus could heal them. But only one of them had faith enough to see that the healing came from God. Only one turned back "praising God with a loud voice." It was the only the one who stopped to thank God who actually saw what happened – God worked through Jesus to meet his need.

And the same is true for us. God works through the Holy Spirit to meet our needs, and through Jesus to grant us salvation. But what is salvation, for us, today? What does that mean for us? Today?

It is interesting that the Greek word for "healing" is the same word used for "salvation." When Jesus says to the one who praised God, "Your faith has made you well" – has healed you – he's really saying that through faith this man is saved, free from want and worry.

Wouldn't that be great – to be free from want and worry? We can be, you know. By following the patterns of life laid out for us in the Bible, we too, can be free from want and worry, saved through our faith in God and our trust in the Lord.

Key among the patterns of a faithful life is returning thanks, having gratitude. "Were not 10 made well? asks Jesus. "But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God...?"

The only one Jesus pronounced "saved" was the one who recognized God as the source of this blessing, this healing in his life. The other just went through the motions.

They knew that the priests were the only ones who could declare them healed, invite them back into the community, so they rush off for that. But what they didn't know was that it is only God who could heal them.

They went through the motions and received some measure of healing, but they failed to embrace all that God desired for them, the freedom of a deep and lasting faith.

How often do we just go through the motions? How often do we settle for getting by in life? How often do we fail to recognize and embrace the freedom that faith in God provides for us?

Think about church. Do we truly appreciate all that a life of worship, and Bible study, and service brings us? Think about it. You have a faith family because of the church. Someone will always be there for you, when you reach out with an open heart.

As the church, we are able to do more than any one of us could do alone, because we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. The church is what ensures for our children and our children's children a legacy of faith and freedom, a legacy that stretches back some 2,000 years.

Also we have our faith to rely on because of the church. And when our faith falters, we have the faith of others, others who believe on our behalf when we just don't have it in us at the time.

And through the church we have the wisdom and instruction of the Bible, the scriptures that the church has upheld and relied upon down through the centuries.

Scripture tells us it matters that we recognize God as the source of life's blessings and that thank God in return. When we thank God, we make it clear to ourselves and others that we are not the source. We may be the one God works through, but God is the source of all blessings.

When we recognize God as the source of life's blessings, we have the power to overcome any worry or want. And not only that, but we also help build and maintain a world where others come to trust in the Lord and put their faith in God, free from want and worry.

I said earlier that God works through the Holy Spirit to meet our needs. So the question for us is, do we – you and I and our families – do we surround ourselves, do you surround yourself with people inspired and led by the Holy Spirit?

Think about how blessed you are when the people around you are people of faith. Think about what a blessing you are to others when the Holy Spirit takes hold of you and leads the way. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We gather in the midst of a misguided, sinful world, O God, with hopes of providing pathways of faithfulness and truth – your truth, not ours.

Open our eyes, sharpen our hearing, and attune our hearts to the wisdom and discernment of the Holy Spirit.

Help us to shine your light a world of darkness and negativity.

Help us to provide hope for those who feel hopeless, to be a friend to the lonely. Help us to avoid making excuses ... like someone else can do it better, ... I am just too busy, ... I'll do it tomorrow ... what difference does it make?

Let us not rely on excuses but do our best to present ourselves to you, O God, as one approved by the Lord, a worker for the Kingdom who has no need to be ashamed.

There is no shame in need, O Lord, and there is grace and mercy in prayer.

We pray for all who need to feel expressions of your care and concern, your healing and provision, and we prayer for ourselves.

Where we can be an instrument of healing, a giver from abundance, or a comforter in Christ, direct us, inspire us, and empower us.

For you, O Lord, are the greatest servant the world has ever known, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**