

Luke 17:11-19
October 9, 2016

“Thanks and Salvation”

Rev. William G. Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

We have all been guilty of this, or know someone who has. Someone pays you a compliment or offers praise for something you have done really well, and you respond, “Oh it was nothing.” Someone gives you an unexpected amount of help; you become embarrassed or worse yet your ego gets wounded; and you respond, “I could have done it myself.” Or, someone surprises you with a very special gift and you respond, “Oh you really shouldn’t have.” We find ourselves deflecting, deferring, and downplaying the generous compliment or gift we received instead of simply saying, “Thank you.”

Psychologists suggest a number of different reasons we don’t say thank you very well, but one seems to be that saying, “thank you” admits something we don’t like to admit. It is a blatant reminder that a full, true, joyful and abundant life depends upon the gifts of God and others. Saying “thank you” reminds us of a humbling lesson: we don’t really belong to ourselves; we are God created, God imprinted, God gifted people whose lives are deeply enhanced by the relationships we enjoy. Our life, our breathe, our abilities, our decisions, our work, our family, our friends, our hobbies, our inspirations, our worship, the goodness and beauty we enjoy, all that we have and all that we are, is given by God to be shared with one another.

As Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem he and his group find themselves in the region between Samaria and Galilee. Here 10 lepers call out to Jesus for healing, he tells them to go show themselves to the priest; 9 of them follow instructions dutifully, but one starts off with the others but then stops and turns around, returning to Jesus to give thanks.

So who is this one who returns? Who in their right mind enjoys admitting they owe everything good and worthy, including life itself, to someone else? Who wants to openly and freely confess we are not self-made men and women? I suspect the person ready to admit such a thing is one who knows that without the goodness of God, and others, they may not be alive by the end of the day. In this situation we meet a Samaritan who has Leprosy.

Samaritans were social and religious outcasts, not counted among Jesus’ flock, judged as heretics. Then, as a leper, this person would have been a double outcast. People with leprosy were quarantined from society, not allowed to enter the temple or even go into the city. It is someone like this, a double outcast, someone who has begged every healer who came through this region to heal him; this is the kind of person who is ready to admit he needs God to enjoy healthy and abundant life. He is the kind of person likely to return and give thanks. And give thanks he does in a dramatic way. He begins shouting his praise and thanks to God at the top of his voice. He prostrates himself at the feet of Jesus.

This Samaritan leper’s turn around invites us to take a closer look at the questions Jesus asks in this story. Jesus asks, “Were not 10 made clean? But the other 9, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

We might find ourselves wondering with Jesus, where are the other 9? But, Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor looks at the church today and wonders, “Where is the 10th?” She asks, “who in the church today is prepared to turn from a faith built on following instructions and live with passion, love and gratitude?” Where is the tenth who gleefully spins around returning to thank God with all that they have and all that they are? Where is the 10th person who knows the faithful response to God is living in love and relationship and thanksgiving instead of dutifully following a set of instructions, or ticking off a perfect check list of right beliefs?

Voltaire, in the 18th century said, “Appreciation is a wonderful thing. It makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well.”

In the face of statistics about decline in the Christian Church, faithful Christians have tried to follow prescriptions and programs intended to reverse the trends. Some congregations have added rock bands, others have changed centuries old liturgies, others have added coffee houses right in their narthex and much, much more. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but the reality is, churches which grow in faith and spirit are churches which intentionally do all they do in thanksgiving to God.

I contend what the church really needs is people alive in Christ Jesus, on fire with the spirit of God; people whose love, compassion, and thanksgiving aren’t confined by instructions but bring down the walls and break the borders we construct between each other.

14th century Mystic Meister Eckhart hit the nail on the head when he wrote about gratitude, “If the only prayer you said was thank you... that would be enough.”

Another author commenting on this story said, “giving thanks is part of the soul’s healing and deliverance.” The impact of this 10th leper’s “turning around” has far greater than merely physical ramifications. Luke’s story indicates a complete redirection of his life. His spiritual disposition has changed; a new and deeper relationship with Jesus Christ has been born, and for this the Samaritan becomes grateful.

Starting last week and over the next few weeks we are sharing stewardship moments in worship. Most of us look forward to hearing how the church and the Spirit of God have touched the lives of our friends and neighbors right here at Emanuel. These stories remind us the still speaking God is at work. These stories become part of our stewardship program each fall as a way to help us all say thank you to God.

I have always found when we give God thanks and praise, we find the flames of faith are fanned, the wind of God’s Spirit blowing strong, the love of God warming us as we become alive in ways we never imagined, and then the church bursts with energy and Spirit. So when a gift or gesture from another makes you well up inside, fight off your first reaction = to deflect, defer or downplay it. Instead, recognize that awkward feeling is gratitude, and then joyfully and confidently say, “Thank you.”

Amen