



Life Together: Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

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The past few months have been ... well, they've been less than ideal. From COVID, to the economy, to digital school and never really having a break from the children (I mean, I love them, but ... all day, every day? Every parent needs a break from time to time), to civil unrest and the pains of racial inequality, to COVID rearing its ugly head again, to planning for (what will likely be) digital school again in the fall ... it's been a difficult season of life, and sadly, it doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon.

In the midst of the past few months, and all that it has thrown our way, I've been in a number of conversations – and I've seen the conversations taking place at a national level – where people are asking the question, “why?” Why is this the way of life right now? Why can't we get ahead of the curve on COVID? Why haven't we seen progress – or more progress – in racial equality? Why can't we gather back together? Why do we have to wear masks? Why ... why is this all so hard?

From all that I have seen, and from what I have gleaned from the conversations I've had by phone, email, and Zoom in recent months, I'm convinced that the “why” of our current national situation has to do with our cultural inability to openly and honestly relate with others. We have lost the ability to engage in reciprocal relationships. We have forgotten how to communicate with others. We are failing to create honest, collaborative, and healthy communities.

I know that we – at Washington Street UMC – are but a small blip on the national map. We are just one church, representing just a few hundred people. And yet, I believe our scope – our breadth of influence – is deep and wide. On a regular Sunday morning right now, with worship being online, we have people joining online at WSUMC.LIVE from multiple countries around the world, and from nearly 1/3 of the States in our country. If we, just a small group of disciples, can model the teaching and call of Jesus Christ, I do believe, we can change our communities – we can change the way our circles communicate – we can influence how our families and friends function. The world changed at the faithfulness of just 11 disciples who were devoted to Christ and filled with the Spirit; how much more can a couple hundred impact the community? Even the world?

Over the coming weeks, we're going to be looking at interpersonal relationships, while asking, what can help us have more faithful, more authentic, and more community-changing relationships? How do we live more authentically and faithfully in the world as Christ has called us to live?

This morning, we start with gratitude.

In Luke 17, Jesus is said to be travelling in the region between Samaria and Galilee, on his way toward Jerusalem. We don't know the exact village he enters – in some ways, the author leaves the village unnamed, because the name of the village doesn't matter. The village Jesus enters is representative of any border town between the Jewish-populated region of Galilee, and the Samaritan-populated region of Samaria. There would have been a mixture of Jews and Samaritans living in the village, even if it was a predominately Jewish town.

As Jesus comes upon the outskirts of the village, ten lepers approached him, keeping their distance. The author again is naming the normal circumstances for such a community. Those with leprosy were outcast from the town – sent to live on the outskirts of the village, away from the populous of the town. Lepers were seen as unclean individuals, who were left to fend for themselves. They survived by begging for help of those who were coming and going from town.

The religious laws of the Jewish community required those with leprosy to maintain a distance from anyone without leprosy. It was one of the laws of the Old Testament that was implemented for the health and well-being of the community. They didn't have the medical science to cure leprosy, nor to prevent its spread in close proximity – so the lepers were sent out. Like these ten individuals, they formed communities among other lepers, as they worked to care for themselves and one another.

So these ten lepers draw near Jesus, while faithfully keeping their distance, and beg for his help, "Jesus, Master," they called out, "have mercy on us!" Jesus sees them, and he speaks to them, telling them to go and show themselves to the priests.

The Jewish law again becomes important to understand the storyline. Leviticus 14 offers a 57-verse chapter on the purification of lepers. If someone has leprosy, there is a very defined ritual for how they might be deemed healed of their leprosy, and how they might be welcomed back into the community. A leper, who has been healed of their leprosy, cannot just walk back into town and assume to be welcomed as one who is no longer a leper – they have to have the blessing and cleansing of the priest.

The odd about Jesus' instruction, is that he sends these ten lepers off to the priest before they had been healed. That they didn't question Jesus' invitation is perhaps indicative of their desperate desire to go home at any cost. They knew Jesus to be someone of authority – they began this interaction by addressing him, "Jesus, Master ..." Perhaps their trust in Jesus' authority usurped any concern for their pre-existing condition.

As they begin their journey toward the priest – who could have been located in the local village, but was more likely to have been located in the Jerusalem temple (which would have been a ways off) – they are healed of their leprosy. They are made clean after leaving to see the priest, with some distance still to journey.

One of the ten, upon realizing he was cleansed of his leprosy, turned around and returned to Jesus. As one who no longer has leprosy, he sees no need to keep a distance from Jesus, and therefore falls at Jesus' feet, praising God with a loud voice, and thanking Jesus. ... To note: he has not yet been ritually purified by a priest, and therefore, according to Jewish law, should have continued to maintain a

distance from Jesus. Until he was purified by a priest, he was still considered unclean. ... The author helps us understand the moment by naming, "He was a Samaritan."

We've seen Jesus encounter Samaritans before. Samaritans are unwelcomed by the Jewish community. They are immigrants in the land of the Jews. They are seen as unclean individuals, even without leprosy, because of the history between the Jews and the Samaritans. If this village was El Paso, on the border of America and Mexico, the Jews would be represented by the Americans, and the Samaritans would be represented by the Mexicans. They are the marginalized group in this border town.

Jesus makes clear that this man was the outsider in his response to the man's return, saying, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this *foreigner*?" He is the expected outcast – the one least expected to return to Jesus.

And yet, I'm also skeptical. As the Samaritan, what good is the priest to this man? He does not claim the same allegiance to the historical faith of the Jews. He likely sees no reason to go to the temple in Jerusalem, a place he wouldn't have been welcomed anyway, as a Samaritan. Why does he need a priest's blessing to acknowledge his own cleanliness.

Just to tease the text out a bit more, we don't know if the other nine were Samaritans or Jews. In such a border region, it's possible that a couple more of the lepers were Samaritans. ... For all we don't know about the ten, what we do know is that this one, the only one of the ten to return to Jesus upon being cleansed, was a foreigner – a Samaritan.

He falls at Jesus' feet, praising God in a loud voice, giving thanks – demonstrating gratitude. And Jesus says to him, "Get up and be on your way, for your faith has made you well."

All ten were healed, were they not? The text tells us they were ... and yet, this man receives this additional blessing by Jesus, "your faith has made you well." Late theologian and scholar, Fred Craddock, suggests this text is better understood as a two-part story: the healing story, where the ten were healed after following Jesus' instruction to leave; and the salvation of a foreigner, where the Samaritan returns and praises God, expressing gratitude to Jesus.ⁱ Craddock asks, what if the healing this Samaritan receives is about something different, something greater than the cleansing of his leprosy?

"Salvation draws together the multilayered (physical, spiritual, and social) human quest for health and restoration – often from beyond the margins of the community."ⁱⁱ That this one – the foreigner – has not only received his physical well-being, but has, in expressing gratitude toward God and Jesus, received his spiritual and social well-being, makes one question, why didn't the other nine return? What kept them from missing out on the fullness of salvation God offers in Jesus Christ?

I keep going back and forth between two possible reasons why the other nine wouldn't have returned. I'm sure there are more than two reasons, and perhaps neither of these reasons is accurate. But the text doesn't tell us, and these two keep rising to the top in my own mind, so I speculate ...

One possibility: I can't help but think, as those who had been under Jewish custom and law their entire lives, that the other nine were so steeped in Jewish tradition, that, even upon realizing they had been cleansed, they believed they needed the priest's ritualistic cleaning in order to return home. They couldn't imagine *Jesus* as offering a new way to salvation, because they had been taught, instructed, and only ever knew the way of their tradition. They kept going, even after being cleansed, because for them, in their world view, they only knew one way to do things, and that way kept them from seeing the expansive and life-changing work of God in Jesus Christ. We saw this in the early Christian church, and quite frankly, we continue to see this kind of response in today's church, where we hold God bound by historic understandings, without giving God the freedom to work in new ways.

Another possibility: The Samaritan was the outcast – he was the foreigner. He was, as a leper, a doubly marginalized individual in that group of ten lepers. I can't help but wonder, was the Samaritan so overwhelmed by Jesus's healing, because for him, it was a most unexpected miracle. His gratitude flowed out of his receiving a most incomprehensible gift. The other nine, assuming they were all Jewish because they all ran to the priest, perhaps had something more of an expectation of God's healing. Though they were lepers, and thus outcast from the community, they were still under the expectation of the benefit of God as Jews. We don't know exactly what they nine did following their healing, but that they did not show the same exuberant gratitude to Jesus as the Samaritan makes me wonder, did they really understand what had happened to them? Did they see the healing as the miraculous gift that it was?

And this is, where I think we – as 21st Century Americans – are invited to hear the text in a very applicable way when it comes to our relationships in community. Do we fully understand the gift we have of being in relationship with others? Do we fully understand the gift we have in being called, Children of a Risen Lord? Do we understand how blessed we really are? Or do we take what we have, where we live, who we live with ... all for granted?

Gratitude is a response that indicates an appreciation for something that we would not necessarily have expected to receive. Perhaps there is no better indicator for what privilege looks like in our world today, than to ask, what do you "expect to receive," versus, what do you find so shocking to have received, that you might return thanksgiving with exuberant gratitude?

I remember, as a first-year student in seminary, hearing the difference in prayers from my Black colleagues than the prayers I had heard growing up in lily-white churches. Without fail, every prayer – whether in worship, in class, or in a small group gathering – every prayer led by a Black Colleague began with a word of gratitude, so much so, that I couldn't help but see the difference. I heard prayers offered that began, "God, we give you thanks for the first breath of this new day ...," "Lord, we are overwhelmed that we awoke to see a new morning ...," "Almighty God, we are filled with thanksgiving for the chance to live another day ..." These prayer were offered as if the first breath, or a new day, or

a new morning were not expected. They expressed this deep gratitude for what I, quite frankly, took for granted.

And it makes wonder, how does our experience – the experience of our families – the experience of our parents – the experience of our “people” – shape our expectations of life, of community, of relationships ... of God?

“Our communication – our communion – with God sets the stage for all of our other relationships.”ⁱⁱⁱ If we are so expecting for what God has to offer us, that we can’t even return a word of gratitude to the Lord for what may seem as a simple gift, no matter how mundane or expectant it may be, how much more do we expect from those around us? How unlikely are we to offer gratitude to others if we can’t even take pause to give thanks to God for the miracle of life – the miracle of new life?

As I have been watching and listening to our nation in recent weeks, it’s become clear, we are an ungrateful people. We are so convinced that we are owed life, that we can’t pause to consider how grateful we should be to have life. So instead of giving thanks for life, we take life for granted, as if it is to be expected. And instead of offering thanks for a new day to live, we complain that the life we have to live is a bit uncomfortable. We find everything we don’t like about the situation we find ourselves in, and complain because it goes against what we expect to have ourselves: like wearing masks, or staying home, or learning online.

I wonder, how does our national conversation change, if we inject faithful gratitude into our relationships – into our communities? Instead of arguing for life *the way we expect to live*, what if we pause and give thanks that we even have life? Instead of arguing for *my comfortable well-being*, what if we pause and give thanks that we have the chance to do this in community? Instead of trying to form relationships that benefit *my ultimate success*, what if we pause and give thanks that God has created us as a beautiful tapestry, and offer gratitude that we get to share the gifts of one another?

Perhaps we need a reset to rethink our relationships, our expectations, and our place in the community. Perhaps we should take this pause to give thanks that we have this life – that we have enough to share – that we have friends, and family – that we have the ability to be safe, and to advocate for the safety and health of everyone. Perhaps we should be more grateful – for like the Samaritan, healed from his own disease, gratitude does more than just express one’s thanksgiving – it offers new life – it reframes our existence – it welcomes us into the grace of the Almighty. May God show us all that we have to be grateful for, that we might live in greater appreciation for the abundance in our midst. Amen.

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

ⁱⁱ John T. Carroll. *Luke: A Commentary (New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quentin J. Shultze & Diane M. Badzinski. *An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Communication*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.