



**Visitation to Church of the Epiphany, Surrey November 12, 2014**  
**The Rt. Rev. Melissa M. Skelton**

**Luke 17:11-19**

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "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?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

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It's easy these days to feel grateful as walk in the park next to my apartment and see the trees with their yellow and red and brown leaves ready to drop or already dropping, signaling the change of the seasons. Yes, it's easy to feel grateful as I watch the dogs in the little dog park in that park cavort and sport, newly energized by sudden coming of the cold air and the bright sun. Yes, it's easy to feel wonder and gratitude as I look at all these things that express the familiar cycle of the seasons and yet get my attention afresh in that each year they strike me as fresh and new.

And at the very same time it's hard these days to feel grateful already swept up into the pace of a fall and a coming winter that means that Advent is just a few weeks away. It's hard to feel grateful with some of what is going on in the world—whether it be the continuing strife in the Middle East, terrorism around the world and the disease we hear about each night on the news. Yes, it's hard to feel grateful in that all these things are familiar and yet each time we encounter them they strike us as new and overwhelming.

And so what is this thing called gratitude which in our Gospel for today Luke depicts as praise offered in the direction of God and thanks offered at the feet of Jesus. What is this thing called gratitude? What effect does it have on us, and where does it take us? And most importantly, how can we have more of it in our lives?

Our passage from Luke today is familiar to many of us. In it, we meet Jesus traveling in a borderland. On one side of the borderland is Galilee, Jesus' home and, therefore, the place of the familiar and acceptable social and religious rhythms of his life. And on the other side of the borderland is the home of the Samaritans, the place of the unfamiliar, the alien and to the Jewish people of the time, the offensive.

As Jesus is traveling through this borderland on his way to Jerusalem, he encounters ten lepers, people who more than just about anyone else, have nowhere to belong. Ejected by their families and their communities for fear of contagion, these miserable ones were forced to wander from place to place as beggars.

The lepers see Jesus, call him by name and, while keeping their distance, beg him to have mercy upon them (which may have amounted to no more than their asking him for money). Instead of immediately healing them, something we might expect him to do, he tells them to go and show themselves to the priest, the person whose job it was to certify anyone's disease-free condition. On their way to do this, Luke tells us that the ten find that they have been cured of their leprosy.

Nine of the ten, we are then told, just keep on going—and who could blame them? After so much suffering and so much isolation, who wouldn't continue on to find a priest, get the necessary clean bill of health and then make a beeline to your village and back to your family?

But one of the lepers, upon seeing his flesh return to normal, does not rush off to get back to his life. He stops, praises God out loud and then turns back and comes to Jesus. Prostrating himself on the ground, he thanks Jesus. To this Luke then adds an identifying and important detail: "And he was a Samaritan," Luke simply comments. Then to this man, the Samaritan, prostrate before him, Jesus then says these words: "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

One commentator says something like this about this story: "What we have here is a story in which nine lepers were healed and in which one leper became whole."

And so to be made whole, we discover, is more than being restored from a terrible illness and a terrible social isolation. It's about how we see that restoration and how we respond to it. It's about the mysterious impulse to praise the source of all being and then for that praise to turn into thanks made in a particular location—prostrate at the feet of Jesus, our God of the borderland between the comforting and familiar rhythms of home and the land of the unfamiliar, the alien and the offensive. It is thanks made at the foot of Jesus, our God who inhabits the borderland and who is on his way to Jerusalem and to the utter alienation of the cross.

You and I, of course, know a lot about life in the borderland—life that is both held together by the memory of and the hope for the comforting rhythms of home and that feels threatened by what we view as unfamiliar, alien or offensive. We ourselves live in that borderland looking for healing, yes, but also looking for the voice of praise that is in us but somehow gets confused or muffled or stifled.

And so this evening for me to tell myself or you that we all need to be more in touch with praise and thankfulness would be a strange thing to do, because I don't actually believe that exhorting someone to praise and to thankfulness has much meaning. And so tonight let's not go to exhortation but instead take a moment for reflection. And then avoiding exhortation again, let's go to the imagination and the energy that lives there.

And so right here and now, think for a moment about the rhythms of your life that you treasure, that you love, that ground you in a kind of holy familiarity in this world. What are the daily and weekly and yearly patterns that you are a part of or that you engage in that mediate the presence of God in your life? Now for those, take one moment to praise the source of all being, the author of all blessings that are near and familiar and dear, and to give thanks for these things.

Now think of the circumstances or the people in your life that are asking you to go up to and over the very border of your own comfort, that are pushing you into a land that is alien and even on some level offensive to you.. What are the circumstances and who are the people that take you to this place? Now for those, take a moment to look for the One who inhabits that place with you, who welcomes the stranger and eats with the outcast, who himself travels into the heart of alienation and offense and finds it the place of new life. And now, though it may feel strange, give thanks to this One, this One who lives with you in these circumstances.

In 1983 the poet William Meredith, known for the clarity and pitch of his verse had a major stroke that left him suddenly deprived of the very thing that was most important to him as a poet—his speech. After much rehabilitation, he made significant progress toward his own healing, continuing to edit and write poetry, especially about what it was like to have traveled deep into a land of such difficult alienation and to have returned to bear witness to it. In his poem, entitled “:Accidents of Birth,” Meredith reflects not only on the praise and thanks that comes from surviving but explores what it's like to meet someone else in whose presence and through whose eyes praise and thanks can be seen and said.

I can only imagine here that in this poem Meredith is referring to his partner who helped him recover. Today, however, I would ask you to imagine that the one he refers to is none other than the Holy and Human One through whose incarnate presence and through whose eyes the world is praiseworthy and through whom thanks is possible.

#### “Accidents of Birth” by William Meredith

Spared by a car or airplane crash or  
cured of malignancy, people look  
around with new eyes at a newly  
praiseworthy world, blinking eyes like these.

For I've been brought back again from the  
fine silt, the mud where our atoms lie  
down for long naps. And I've also been  
pardoned miraculously for years

by the lava of chance which runs down  
the world's gullies, silting us back.  
Here I am, brought back, set up, not yet  
happened away.

But it's not this random  
life only, throwing its sensual  
astonishments upside down on  
the bloody membranes behind my eyeballs,  
not just me being here again, old  
needer, looking for someone to need,  
but you, up from the clay yourself,  
as luck would have it, and inching  
over the same little segment of earth-  
ball, in the same little eon, to  
meet in a room, alive in our skins,  
and the whole galaxy gaping there  
and the centuries whining like gnats—  
you, to teach me to see it, to see  
it with you, and to offer somebody  
uncomprehending, impudent thanks.

