

“Thank you”

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Lawrence Park Community Church

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Thanksgiving Weekend

Luke 17: 11-19

Today's reading is about gratitude, a fitting theme for Thanksgiving weekend. But since it comes to us from 2000 years ago, there are some details in it which are a bit obscure. The men who Jesus heals in this reading do not have leprosy, although it is often translated that way. Scientists and archaeologists have not found any evidence that the bacteria that causes leprosy was present in Israel in Christ's time. However, people back then did suffer from various skin rashes and ailments, such as exzema. These are not as debilitating as leprosy. But in Christ's day, and long before, skin ailments were considered a particularly problematic kind of disease.

Back then, a skin disease was not just a physical ailment. It was also a spiritual problem. The ancient Jewish purity laws ruled that any skin disease that lasted for more than two weeks meant that a person was unclean. It was up to priests to examine the person. If they had pus or anything else disrupting the skin's surface, and it lasted, then they were to be thrown out of the community as unclean, a threat to everyone else. They would not be allowed to go to temple or stay in town. The scripture reads:

..... 45 “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ 46 As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp. (Leviticus 3)

These rules were still being observed in Christ's time. The ten men he encounters live in a group because they are social outcasts. They cannot hold down jobs, marry or live among others in society. They are desperately poor and shunned by everyone except each other. They are considered unclean, physically and spiritually. They are also believed to be contagious. So no one comes near them.

But Jesus does. This is one of the shocking elements of this story. Jesus treats them like real people, worthy of respect. And he heals them, from a distance. He tells them to go see the priests, so they can be certified as healed and re-enter society. When churches talk about our duty to help the marginalized and the outcast, this is a story to keep in mind. This is what Jesus does. He helps the people shunned by society.

After Jesus heals them, he tells them to go to the priests so they can be declared clean again, and re-enter society. The ten men run off, astounded that their skin has cleared, that their torture is over. But one man comes back. He is not a Jew. He is a Samaritan. They were Jews long ago, but due to invasions and disputes, they no longer worship at the Temple, and they follow their own religious ways. The Jews despise them for this. Yet, it is this man who comes back to thank Jesus for the healing. This is another reason this story is shocking. Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, is being thanked by one of the despised Samaritans. All sorts of rules are being broken on this day.

We live in a time when the practice of gratitude is changing. A year ago, my wife and I stayed in an inn up north for a night. It was a small place, under new management. In the morning, we were talking to the owner. We thanked him for a really nice stay in a very clean place with a great view. He appreciated our gratitude, said thank you, then he said something else. He asked us if we would be willing to go online and rate his inn. This is how he attracts new customers.

There was a time when the only way to know the rating of a hotel or restaurant was to buy a book and see how many stars critics had given it. The Michelin stars for restaurants, for example. We still speak of 5 star hotels. But back then, it wasn't customers who did the rankings, but experts. Now all of us can rank restaurants, bars, Uber drivers, even professors in university.

But are ratings the same as gratitude? We really liked that inn. If we gave it four stars online, would that still be an expression of gratitude? Or is something else going on? Ratings reflect a judgement on the quality of a place we have paid for. Did it live up to our expectations for that price? A person could stay in a very luxurious hotel room, but if they find a rip in the sheets, they may feel they are not getting their money's worth. This may earn the hotel a poor rating, even though the client had a great stay.

Ratings are different from gratitude. Ratings can express satisfaction, but they can also express ingratitude. Ratings incline us to ask - did I get what I deserved? But, gratitude is an expression for when we receive something that is more than we deserved. And often, what we are grateful for doesn't cost anything at all. And it is unexpected. Someone holds a door open for us. A

friend drops by a casserole when we are sick. Someone simply listens when we have had a bad day.

Imagine if after Jesus healed the men He had called out to them - don't forget to give me a rating with the priests!

That would change everything. It would make it seem like Jesus was trying to drum up more business as a healer, rather than healing people spontaneously. It matters that Jesus is not doing this for ratings or for more healing gigs. For it to be a true gift, it must be given freely, with no expectation of reward.

Our culture has another way of giving thanks which is older than digital ratings. Thank you cards. This used to be very common, even for saying thank you for a nice night at someone's house, or a dinner. Newlyweds still do it, a survival from an earlier time. They are expected to send thank you cards for every gift they have received.

The best thank you cards are handwritten. It feels like the person has shared some of their inner being, their soul, with you. You have some of them in your hands. The card is inspired by the receipt of a thing you may have bought in a store. The present expressed your consideration of the new couple. There's a bit of soul in that. The hand written thank you card amplifies that soul connection. Their scrawl, the words that are hard to read, that's them, in all their specificity. You have a piece of them in your hands. Expressions of gratitude take us into the soul realm, where connection to another person is the prime value. It has a very different feeling than a rating.

That feeling can show up in strange ways. Downtown, just outside Chinatown, there is a vegan Chinese restaurant called the Buddha Vegan Restaurant. My wife and I had heard about it, so we went in for lunch one day when we were in the neighbourhood. It is very small, just one room. There are only a few tables, but it has been in business for thirty years. The reason I mention it is because of what is on the walls.

Patrons are allowed to write comments on the walls. And they have. People from all over the world have written the equivalent of thank you notes on the walls, covering every inch.

Sitting at the tables, you can't help but see the thank yous and read them. There's something about all these expressions of gratitude which changes the experience of being in the restaurant. It is like being surrounded by good vibes. The handwriting is messy, it looks like graffiti, but the whole room vibrates with positive energy. Gratitude can change how we feel, even when it is not for us.

Last week, we went back for dinner at this restaurant so we could get these pictures. We ordered four dishes. Two of them were plates of vegetables, done in a Chinese style. The other two were fake meats - one was chicken, the other was sweet and sour pork. That was amazing. This is not a big restaurant, it can only seat about ten to twelve people. There was a table next to us where four people were eating. You know what it is like in Canadian restaurants. There is an invisible wall between the tables. We're supposed to ignore each other. If someone tells a funny joke at the table next to you, you can't join in and laugh. We each in our own world at our tables.

Now, the table next to us ordered food which we saw come in. They only ordered rice and two of the fake meat dishes. But they ordered a lot, like double portions of everything. I saw that they had ordered the general Tao chicken, which wasn't really chicken. It looked good, so I jokingly, discreetly made a grabbing gesture, looking at my wife. But, the woman next to me, a few feet away, noticed. And she held the plate out to me, in a friendly way, and asked if I wanted to try some. I was a little embarrassed. I said no at first, but she offered again, so I said yes. Then, we offered her some of our sweet and sour pork. So we traded food.

Now, I never done that before in a restaurant. People don't share food with strangers. And although I can't prove it, I suspect that the reason that invisible border between the table was breached was because of all the gratitude on the walls. All those thank you notes created a different vibe in the place. Gratitude can lead to generosity, and borders can be ignored.

In today's scripture reading, there are all sorts of borders. We are told at the opening of the story that it takes place on the border of Galilee and Samaria, those who nations who hate each other. Jesus helps a bunch of social outcasts, people who live at the far edges of their society, another kind of border.

But this story is about breaching borders. Jesus heals men others would keep at the border. Their healing allows them to come back into society. But the only man who runs back to thank Jesus is a Samaritan. A man who should be avoiding this Jewish rabbi from Galilee. But not

only does he rush back towards this Jewish man, crossing a spiritual border, he also throws himself at Christ's feet. This man who had a skin disease touches this rabbi. This may be the first time he has been able to touch someone in years. This, too, is a border crossing.

This reaction surprises Jesus. There seems to always be an element of surprise in true gratitude. Why is it that this man came back? He's already cured, he could have kept running. What does this man have that the others lack? Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well. He can't mean his skin, that was cured before he came back. No, his wellness, of his soul, not just his body, comes from his faith. His sense of openness and connection to God, to Jesus, to a universe that gives us the water we drink, the air we breathe, the people we love. This man knows how to give thanks because he already has humility. Gratitude and humility go hand in hand. He starts by praising God, then thanking this rabbi who has acted as God's instrument.

This story is in the Bible not because Jesus healed the men, but because this Samaritan came back. He showed what a faithful life looks like. A man, dressed in rags, hated by everyone around him, gives thanks. The world creates so many ways to divide us. This story happens on the border of Galilee and Samaria. On the border of the clean and the unclean, on the border of two ways of worshipping, on the border of skin and world. Through a simple expression of gratitude, those borders dissolve.

Jesus sends this man away with the words, "go, your faith has made you well." This man has a faith rooted in humility and gratitude. His ability to say thank you to a stranger from a hated tribe has the power to heal what divides us in life. This is the kind of faith that will keep this man well in his soul, no matter what happens to his body. For, the truth is, our bodies will fail us, that is simply the price of time. But a soul that can give thanks can weather whatever comes. Our faith can keep us well, to the end of this life, and beyond.

Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.