

One Came Back

Luke 17:11-19

Text:

He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

—Luke 17:16

Introduction

If you hear the faint sound of a clanging bell in the dusty distance, pay close attention. If it gradually grows louder, raise your head, perk up your ears, stop your conversation, be silent, and listen. If it comes closer and closer, and the sound is now distinct and unmistakably characteristic of approaching contagion, listen prudently for the dusty voice and doleful lament: *Unclean! Unclean! Unclean!* If a small colony of lepers appears from around the bend in the road in this hot, arid region between Samaria and Galilee, keep your distance. One thing is certain: they are ceremonially unclean, afflicted with diseased skin, characterized by grotesque eruptions, oozing sores, multiple nodules, ugly ulcerations, unspeakable deformities, and loss of sensation.

Deemed to be contagious, they have been tossed together from all walks and stations of life, from disparate economic and ethnic backgrounds—wealthy and poor, male and female, Jews and Samaritans, natural enemies and unfortunate friends—relegated to the same isolating quarantine, shunned into the same segregating seclusion, separated from social intercourse by the same religious laws that apply to diseased outcasts. To be sure, *misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows.*ⁱ And here are ten strange bedfellows—nine Jews and one Samaritan—calling to Jesus from a distance: *Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.*

Sharper than a Serpent's Tooth

Go and show yourselves to the priest! Here Jesus refers to the law as written in Leviticus 13, which requires a leprous person to show himself to the priest. Then something quite astounding occurs: *As they went, they were made clean.* That is, as they—in good faith—obeyed Jesus' directive, they were healed.

One came back. Nine did not. Only one returned to the Master, praising God with a loud voice, prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

Naturally the first question that occurs to us is the same one that dawned on Jesus: what happened to the other nine? *Were not ten made cleaned,* asks Jesus. *But the other nine, where are they?*

A prominent biblical scholar offered four possible reasons:

Cultural self-differentiation: These nine Jews separated themselves from their natural enemy the Samaritan as soon as the bond of common misfortune was snapped and common sorrow was lifted;

Legalism: These nine Jews, in their legalistic adherence to the Torah, which required them to show themselves to the priest, continued on to the temple, obeying the letter of the law while neglecting the spirit of the law;

Entitlement: In their Jewish pride, they felt that they had a basic right to the blessings, and attributed their blessings to their relation as Israelites to God rather than to the mercy of Jesus the Christ;

Thanklessness: Sheer ingratitude,ⁱⁱ which is *sharper than a serpent's tooth*ⁱⁱⁱ . . . *more hideous . . . than the sea-monster.*^{iv}

I hate ingratitude, writes the poet, *more in a man*

*Than lying, vainness, babbling drunkenness,
Or any taint of vice whose strong corruption
Inhabits our frail blood.*^v

*Blow, blow, thou winter wind!
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude.*^{vi}

So, what about the other nine? Actually, we have no clear evidence to draw a definitive conclusion. We ask the question simply because we wonder . . . but also because Jesus asked the question: *Were not ten made clean?*

Would We Return?

The salient question for us, however, is this: Are we ones who would return with the Samaritan to thank the Master? This is the key question that opens the door to our souls, that examines our faith, that sheds light on our discipleship. The answer to that question determines our essential relationship with the Source of our Being, with the Savior of our Life.

When the Samaritan turned back and fell down at Jesus' feet in lowly worship and thanksgiving, that act not only revealed him to be a man of gratitude but it disclosed him as well to be a man of faith and subsequently a disciple of the Christ.^{vii} Shall we fall at the Master's feet and thank him? This is the significant question. This is the pertinent question for us this Thanksgiving Sunday.

Earlier this month, in the November *Bower Hill News*, I referred to the early Pilgrim Thanksgivings in Plymouth, which were celebrated in a state of scarcity. Hovering over the early settlers was the perpetual threat of starvation. Out of this starkness grew an equally stark New England tradition—one to be observed for years to come—in which it was customary at Thanksgiving to place five kernels of corn at every plate as a reminder of the first winter, when only seven healthy colonists nursed the sick, and nearly half their number lay in the windswept graveyard on a nearby hill. The food supply had been so depleted that only five small kernels of corn were rationed to each individual at a time. Five kernels of thankfulness.

As we place this tradition of five small kernels of corn as an overlay on the story of Jesus and the ten lepers, I believe we can discern five essential realities for which we are especially thankful.

I. God Is God

Verse 12: *... ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance...*

Here is Jesus: God in their very midst, but while they can approach him, they must keep their distance. It is perfectly legitimate to read this as a metaphor for the transcendence of God, who is at a distance, high and lifted up, who is beyond our reach, who is wholly other. Here is the emissary of the God who has created the world, the universe, and everything therein. This God is distinctly different from his creation, independent from his creation, over and above his creation.

*I saw the Lord high and lifted up, wrote Isaiah.^{viii}
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts (higher) than your thoughts.^{ix}*

God is the God of mystery, larger than we can comprehend. He transcends his creation and is far beyond it and not limited by it. On our own, we are at a distance from him and there is no way we are able to apprehend the transcendent God, for God is God.

In Franz Kafka's novel titled *The Castle*, a land surveyor comes into the village and seeks the way up the mountainside to the castle where the king of the country resides. He soon discovers that there is no way through the woods to the summit, no way to gain entrance into the mysterious castle. We Christians are likely to read this as an allegory about "the human quest for comprehension of the ways of an incomprehensible God."^x The truth of the matter is that God is far beyond our comprehension, and there is no conceivable way to understand the full nature or the immeasurable magnitude of our God. God alone is in charge of the universe, for which we are grateful. The first kernel of thankfulness is: we are thankful that God is God.

II. Christ Is Emmanuel

The second kernel of thankfulness is that Christ is Emmanuel: God with us. Verse 16: *He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.*

Now, having received the blessing of healing, the Samaritan leper is no longer keeping his distance. In point of fact he is in immediate proximity to God Incarnate. He is so close to this living God, that the leper can touch his feet, praise his name with a loud voice, and thank him profusely as he lies prostrate before the Master. There is no getting any closer to God than this. This God in Christ—the Emmanuel: God with us—is nearer than breath and dearer than life. This is God who is close.

A few months ago I went to Vanadium Woods to serve communion in a Sunday afternoon worship service. What was the first favorite hymn the people requested? You could guess it! *In the Garden.*

*I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.
And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
And he tells me I am his own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known.*

I have heard sophisticated pastors denigrate this hymn as being too individualistic, too schmaltzy, too syrupy. Regarding this favorite hymn, I for one would forego pastoral sophistication in order to embrace its sentiment of divine proximity. We are in a personal relationship with Christ, the Son of God, God Incarnate. Wouldn't you be ecstatic to have Christ walk with you, talk with you, and tell you that you are his own, that you belong to him? Oh, that I could fall at his feet and thank him. To be sure, I am thankful that Christ is Emmanuel: God with us. For we are the recipients of this grand paradox: that God at the same time is both transcendent (at a distance) and imminent (nearer than breath).

Two kernels of thankfulness: God is God, and Christ is Emmanuel.

III. God Restores Our Life

The third kernel of thankfulness is that God restores our life.

Verse 15: *Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed . . .* When the Samaritan leper saw that he was healed, he realized that God had done a mighty work through this man Jesus of Nazareth, that God in Christ had restored his life.

Whatever form our leprous life has assumed, whatever direction our leprous life has taken, whatever dead-end our leprous life is heading down, God in Christ is able to restore our life.

If our life is damaged by a leprous anger or hostility;
if our life is distorted by a leprous jealousy or envy;
if our life is deranged by a leprous resentment or vindictiveness;
if our life is determined by a leprous addiction or compulsion;
if our life is derailed by a leprous concupiscence or obsession;
God in Christ can restore our life.

IV. God Gives Us Faith

Verse 19: . . . *your faith has made you well.*

The fourth kernel of thankfulness: God gives us faith: *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*^{xi} How long had this Samaritan leper been hoping for a cure, suspecting he would never see the day of his deliverance! Yet he must have held onto the conviction that what he couldn't see or even imagine would one day come to pass, by faith, by hope.

The Rev. Carlyle Marney, the renowned twentieth century pastor and teacher in the Southern Baptist tradition told of an insensitive colleague who visited one of his parishioners in the hospital. He told the woman, who was dying with cancer, that she needed more faith. "Faith!" she exclaimed insistently. "Faith! I have faith! What I need is an advent!" What the woman was longing for was a new beginning, a new start to her stalled life, a dawn upon her darkness; and that new beginning she had in Christ . . . through faith! The fourth kernel of thankfulness represents our deep thanks that God has freely given us the gift of faith.

V. God Gives Us Another Life

The fifth kernel of thankfulness is our infinite gratitude that God has given us another life.

Verse 19: *Get up and go on your way.* . . . Here Jesus is sending the healed, restored, prostrated Samaritan leper of faith into a new path, into a new and renewed life, full of health and immeasurable opportunities, equipped—as a disciple of Christ—with the assurance of eternal life.

Helen Keller—blind, deaf, non-oral since her infancy—emphatically declared as an adult: "For three things I thank God every day of my life: thanks that he has vouchsafed (granted) me knowledge of his works; deep thanks that he set in my darkness the lamp of faith; deep, deepest thanks that I have another life to look forward to—a life joyous with light and flowers and heavenly song."

Underlying the delicious fervor with which we live every day of our lives is the undying conviction that *we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed . . . this mortal nature shall put on immortality . . . Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*^{xii}

Conclusion

If you and your family each had five small kernels of corn at your Thanksgiving table, what five essential blessings would your kernels of thankfulness represent? They may well be different for each of us. I trust that what would be the same, however, is that each of us would accompany the one who came back, and there we would prostrate ourselves at Christ's feet and thank him:

*O Lord! that lends me life,
Lend me a heart replete with thankfulness.^{xiii}*

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November 22, 2009**

Notes

ⁱ Shakespeare, *The tempest*, II, ii, 42

ⁱⁱ For a discussion of these four considerations of the question, see Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 703

ⁱⁱⁱ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I, iv, 312

^{iv} Loc. cit., I, iv, 283

^v Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, III, iv, 390

^{vi} Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, vii, 174

^{vii} Edersheim, p. 703

^{viii} Isaiah 6:1

^{ix} Isaiah 55:8-9

^x William Rose Benét, *The Reader's Encyclopedia*, p. 174

^{xi} Hebrews 11:1

^{xii} See I Corinthians 15:51-58

^{xiii} Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, Part II*, I, I, 19