

Thankful Hearts

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Super Duper Messy Kind of Perfect Kind of Love" by Kerri Rosenthal

Prayer of Illumination

O Lord our God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may be obedient to your will and live always for your glory; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)

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."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Thankful Hearts

There was a news article some time ago in Washington DC about a memorable auction put on by the police. One hundred unclaimed bicycles were being auctioned off. There was an eleven-year-old boy there who called out his bid for the first bike, "ONE DOLLAR!" Unfortunately, the bidding went much higher. Each time a bike came up, the boy called out with a ring of hope, "ONE DOLLAR!"

The auctioneer, who had been auctioning stolen or lost bikes for 43 years, noticed that the boy's hopes seemed to soar ever higher whenever a racer-type bicycle was put up. The last bike like this was up for sale and the bidding began, going all the way up to eight dollars. "SOLD!" declared the auctioneer, "to that boy over there for nine dollars!" He then took eight dollars from his own pocket and asked the boy for his dollar. The young boy pulled out the pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters from his pocket. Then he took his bike and started to leave. But then, after going only a few feet, you could hear the skid of tires. Carefully parking his new possession, the boy went back, gratefully threw his arms around the auctioneer's neck, and cried. Grace and Gratitude.

Jesus was on his way to the city of destiny, Jerusalem, the place where he would fulfill his divine purpose. It was there that the cross awaited him. But he wasn't there yet. Traveling through the geographical boundaries of Galilee and Samaria, Jesus came upon ten lepers.

Leprosy created its own boundaries of separation. It was its own country. "Unclean" lepers had to social distance, not six feet, but as one ancient authority wrote fifty yards of social distancing from the "Clean." Leprosy was a lonely experience. The skin infection brought more than physical pain. It also brought the pain of social isolation and spiritual alienation from family and friends.

On a smaller scale we can relate with this during these holidays. Many of us won't be gathering with family because of the surge in the pandemic. Ironically, leprosy created a community of alienated souls. It brought together strange bedfellows. At least one or more of the ten was Samaritan, the others, Jews. As you know, the Jews and Samaritans reviled one another. But with leprosy, their racial and national barriers were erased. Whether Jew or Samaritan, they were just outsiders, ostracized and unclean, together.

So the ten outcasts called out to Jesus from a distance. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Their misfortune brought them together. Fortunately, Jesus could help their misfortune. These are the ones—the lepers—the least of these to whom Jesus came to make clean and whole.

But Jesus does something very interesting—he doesn't heal the lepers on the spot. He called back, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." He told them to leave—while they still had leprosy. Jesus wanted to bring them into the healing process.

They had to trust and obey—that the healing would come. To leave without being healed takes faith. Belief in the power and trustworthiness of Jesus' word.

Sometimes the healing journey is short, other times we have to walk a long, long way before the healing comes.

But we read, “While they were on their way” Or “AS THEY WENT”-- they were made all clean—all ten.

But only one of the ten “saw” that he was made clean. He alone perceived that he was made whole by the word and the mouth of Jesus.

This story is not only about the healing power of Jesus. This story is about the attitude of the person healed. It’s about the eyes of faith and the miraculous spiritual perception that gratitude gives us.

Earlier in Luke’s gospel Jesus says, “God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” This is called common grace. But God wants so much more than that. God wants to relate with us. Jesus doesn’t just want to cure you, he wants to commune with you.

This is an opportunity for us to slow down and reflect: Have I turned back to thank Jesus for his kindness to me? Don’t forget. Don’t move on. Return. Revere. Rejoice. Render thanks. It’s so easy to receive an amazing gift, an answered prayer, a successful surgery, a kind note, an act of love, the forgiveness of a mistake. And once we get it, we move on.

Then we ask for the next thing. In those times we forget everything is a gift: each morsel of food, each swig of clean water, each breath that we draw, the roof over your head, each good night’s sleep. A kind word or act, a hug or even an air hug from family or a friend. It’s all grace, all a gift. As one person asked, if you wake up tomorrow morning, and only have what you’ve been grateful for today, how much would you have? There’s the miracle of healing and there’s the miracle of gratitude in our lives.

Gratitude helps us to actually see and to perceive how blessed we really are. How much we already have. Our lives are enriched by gratitude. It makes visible our many unseen gifts. Don’t only appreciate them when they’re gone.

Ingratitude is insidious because it forgets how much we have. Its blinded to the fact that everything is a gift.

Theologian Karl Barth defines sin as ingratitude to God. Count your blessings Immanuel. List them. Write them down. Journal them. Pray them back to God. Write gratitude letters.

I’ll tell you who and what I’m thankful for: I’m grateful to my parents, who not only brought me into this world, but fed me, carried me, changed my diapers, gave me shelter, education, and taught me about Jesus and to be an adult. And they loved me so much, they would even say no to me when they needed to. I’m grateful for my teachers: my 2nd grade teacher Mrs. Moffit at Hopi Elementary, my 6th grade teacher Ms. Hild, and the legendary Mr. Chick at Roosevelt who often said to us: “Repetition is the key to learning!” Thank God for Ms. Spicuzza at Oak Park High who made me memorize Shakespeare.

We need to encourage all our teachers out there. This is a tough time. Lift them up for their hard work and the risks they take. It is often a thankless job. Let’s change that and thank them.

Thank you, teachers!

I'm grateful for our church. Grateful for doctors, nurses, scientists, and first responders. Grateful for vaccines. Grateful to live in such great country. Grateful for God's calling on my life to serve Christ and feed his flock. "Bless the Lord, O my soul," says David, "and forget not his benefits."

This Thursday, and every day, let's make it a day of THANKSGIVING. Resist the urge for GRUMBLED-GIVING.

The Good Samaritan is famous, and rightly so. But let's not forget the Grateful Samaritan. These reviled and revered Samaritans have much to teach us. The Grateful Samaritan does three things:

- Praises God.
- Falls at the feet of Jesus.
- And thanks Jesus.

His healing was more than skin deep, it went to the heart.

Like Dr. Seuss's Grinch, the real miracle is when our heart is changed on the inside, when our heart is broken-open and enlarged, where God fills it up with love, deep joy, and appreciation.

Jesus tells us—make sure you don't just wash the outside of your dirty cups and bowls. More importantly, wash the inside too. The miracle of gratitude gets out the grease and grime of our entitlements and resentments. The real healing starts when we obey, when we trust, when we go in the direction of healing—which is towards Jesus. Jesus told the ten lepers to go to the temple where the priests would declare them clean as the book of Leviticus instructs. But which temple would they go to? The Jewish temple in Jerusalem? The Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim?

Samaritans were foreigners and there were signs posted all around the temple: FOREIGNERS KEEP OUT. Maybe that's why the Grateful Samaritan doesn't go back to the Temple. He goes not to the Temple, but to the Teacher. "I say unto," says Jesus, "One who is greater than the temple is here."

The temple housed the glory of God. You encountered God at the temple—if you were Jewish. But Jesus changed things. Now you go to a person, not a place to encounter God. And anybody can encounter God. God was in Christ. We encounter God when we go to Christ.

All of us are unclean because of our sin, all of us. Everyone can go to Christ who makes the unclean clean. Jew and Samaritan. Jerusalem and Gerizim. Positive and Negative. Young and Old. Black, white, and every skin tone in between. Gay or straight. Male or female. Popular and rejects. Bluebloods and rednecks. Democrats, Republicans, and Libertarians. Suburbanites and Urbanites. Cowboys and City Slickers.

Jesus heals our wounds and our rifts, breaks down barriers and builds bridges, and washes us clean. Thank God for the Grateful Samaritan who saw better than anyone else that in Jesus, the kingdom of Heaven has come near.

On this Christ the King Sunday, let us follow the example of the Grateful Samaritan, and be grateful to the King of kings and the Lord of lords, because God is glorified by our gratitude to Jesus. Faith and healing are incomplete until they are marked by gratitude.

Jesus asked three questions.

- Where are the other nine?
- Were not ten made clean?
- Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?

Don't miss the greatest moment of your life, the greatest opportunity you'll ever have, to return to Jesus and say, "thank you."

Are you with the nine? Or the one? Be a part of the 10% Club, not the 90%. Jesus left the 99 to find the 1 lost sheep. Jesus seeks and finds us. We have a calling to leave the NINE to go back to the ONE, the ONE who healed us. Are you seeking after Jesus? He's seeking after you.

What direction is your life going? Are you walking away from Jesus or falling head over heels in love with Jesus? Jesus tells the Grateful Samaritan, and you and me, "Get up—go on your way, your faith has made you well."

Another translation is RISE UP. It's the same root word in the Greek from which we get resurrection. RISE UP above your situation. RISE UP above your frustration. RISE UP above it all. Live the gift of the resurrection life and give thanks to our Crucified and Risen Lord.

With Christ, we can live and move and be-live wholeheartedly with an encouraged heart, a tempered heart, and a thankful heart. This kind of heart is open, open to God, open to others, open even to ourselves.

Immanuel, let's choose a healed heart, every day.

Amen.

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