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"The Man Who Said, 'Thank You'"

Luke 17:11-19

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Amid all the reforms of the 16th century, Martin Luther was once asked to describe the nature of true worship. He replied that the nature of true worship could be found in the tenth leper turning back. You may see what he meant in just a few moments as we unpack the story.

Before we come to it, it may help you to know that Jesus is traveling in a borderland. Samaria and Galilee border each other—and even though our text will say so, there is no actual "region between" the two lands. Luke doesn't worry too much with geography. The route he describes, of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, to the cross, is not a direct one. And it appears to be that the journey, for Luke anyway, is the point. The encounters Jesus has along the way reveal something not only about who he is, but about the nature of the kingdom he will establish.

> Luke 17:11-19. 11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' 14When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean.15Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' 19Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

It's a pitiful scene, really. In my favorite children's storybook Bible, the men are pictured huddled together under the shade of a tree. Wrapped in bandages on their leprous faces and extremities, they had no one to turn to for help. Living on the edge of society, they existed in an in between place. They could not be with their families. They could not sleep in their own homes. Feared by those they used to call friends and family, they were forced to beg for change and scraps to survive.

They were sick and they were lonely, and they were sad. Despite all that was wrong with them, however, the men could hear. They knew who was coming and going through town. And one day, they heard him coming. The Gospels tell us that wherever Jesus went, a crowd was sure to follow. The men heard the commotion of Jesus coming up the road, and they had heard that Jesus could do amazing things. They saw their chance and they seized it. They cried out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

And Jesus did.

Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priest. The priest was the only one who could certify them as leprosy-negative. So, the men obey. They started down the road together, all ten, when somewhere along the way, they discover their skin is clear, their wounds aren't weeping, their pain is gone; they have been healed! Almost all of them continue on to the priest, because that's what Jesus told them to do, and because that's what the rules say—the priest is the one with the authority to let them return to their families and their jobs and their lives as they had known them before.

Ten men were healed, but one man drops back, stops, and turns around. He runs back, "praising God with a loud voice." He threw himself at Jesus' feet, pouring out the gladness of his thanksgiving. And [as Luke points out] this one was a Samaritan. We don't know how he came to hang with the other 9, but I suppose tribalism falls away when one lives on the margins. And now though this man is healed, he remains an outsider, whether a priest proclaims him clean or not. As Barbara Brown Taylor describes him, he had been a double outsider. A leper, confined to live his life on the outskirts of town, and a Samaritan, despised by his Galilean neighbors.

At first glance, this is a healing story. Ten men were healed, and one man said, "Thank you." But on a deeper level, our story is about gratitude from an unlikely place. As Debie Thomas writes, it is "about *the gratitude of a foreigner* who receives welcome."

In her 2016 *Christian Century* commentary, writer and blogger Debie Thomas shares a memory.

> *One day when I was four years old and bored, I went snooping in my father's study. In the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet, I found a manila folder with four navy blue booklets wrapped in tissue paper. One of them (I*

discovered to my delight when I unwrapped it) had a baby picture of me inside, along with several pleasingly blank pages needing "art." Grabbing a pencil, I climbed into my dad's desk chair and began to draw.

I don't know how many pages I defaced before my father walked into the study and caught me. "What are you doing?" he cried, snatching the booklet out of my hands and flipping through its now grubby pages. Only after he took the pencil and set to work erasing my drawings with tremendous care did I realize he wasn't angry; he was frightened.

"What are those?" I asked, stunned that I had unnerved my father.

"Our passports," he said, scattering eraser shavings all over the place. He sighed and kept erasing. "These books are what prove we belong here. Without them . . ." He didn't finish the sentence. "Never play with such things again."

I didn't. Even now, decades later, I treat my U.S passport gingerly, like an icon or a fragile bit of lace. When I travel internationally with my kids, I hover over their passports, checking often to make sure they haven't left the booklets in a seat back pocket or an airport Starbucks. They laugh at me, but I don't care; something in me insists on vigilance. My father's old, immigrant fear—the fear of not belonging, of being cast out—lives on.[i]

The story in Luke 17 is not only a healing story. It is about identity—about exclusion and inclusion, exile and return."[ii] And it's about the kingdom of God. It tells us something important about who is invited, who belongs, and who thrives in the realm where God dwells.

Both Samaritans and Jews claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham. Samaritans had evolved in the Northern Kingdom, a result of Assyrian exile and return. They read only from the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible, and worshiped God on Mt. Gerizim. The Jews in the Southern Kingdom like Jesus, read additional books like the Prophets and Writings (what we know today as our Old Testament) and they worshiped God in Jerusalem.

From the outside looking in, it can be hard for us to recognize why they despised each other so. But is it not true that we find it hardest to accept those with whom we disagree when the shared foundation is *close* to our own?

Like a family member whose politics have shifted so far one direction or the other; the immigrant neighbors who let their chickens wander and their children run wild; the church that declares they're the only ones with true biblical preaching. Isn't it true, when it comes down to it, that despite our differences, we hold more in common than not?

Years ago, Chris and I attended a Lake Fellow reunion at my former church, Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis. It was the church's 175 anniversary, and they invited all their former pastoral residents like me back to town for the celebration. There were dozens of us who traveled to represent the church's decades' long dedication to new pastors through that program.

We met men and women who were serving congregations across the country in many different contexts. One alumni of the program had been serving as pastor of a small church in WV—I believe he serves there still. At dinner one evening, we were all asked to share where we found hope for the future of the church.

One woman responded that the youth in her youth group gave her hope for the future. Another shared that she found hope in the work of her deacons, and another said he gave thanks for the medical clinic that meets in his church basement. And then this WV pastor stood and shared about the tension in his church.

He shared about the addiction woes his community had faced—how his son had been the only child that did not have to be weaned off drugs in the NICU at his birth, how opioids were changing the face of his neighborhood, and the racism that remained ingrained in the town. He knew for a fact that he had members of his church that were or had been members of the KKK.

It was hard to see where he was going. There wasn't much *hope* in what he'd had to offer thus far. Then the pastor told us about how a refugee resettlement program had relocated a large number of African refugees into the heart of his town, many lived within walking distance of his church. The people that had lived there for generations were not too pleased to have these "outsiders" as their new neighbors, moving in nearby houses and apartments and filling vacant jobs.

Soon, some of these refugees started showing up to worship. The pastor was glad, but also a little worried. What would some of his members say about—or worse—what would some of his members say *to* these new visitors that they were dubious about.

Time passed, and to his relief, members of his church seemed to get used to the African neighbors who worshiped and sang with them each Sunday morning. Slowly, they were integrating into the life of the church, attending Sunday school, volunteering, and serving on committees—even one man being nominated to serve as an elder.

The pastor said he held his breath as the congregation took a vote and passed the slate of elders through. He held his breath again as the man knelt and was ordained and installed before the congregation. So far, he thought, things were going smoothly.

But then it came time for the new elders to serve communion on Maundy Thursday night. It was a popular service. The small sanctuary was nearly full. And then the pastor saw it. The African man was set to serve the front row. And there on the inside aisle at the first pew sat an old man the pastor knew to have been a former Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon. It was one thing for the man to sit in the sanctuary rows away from his African neighbor. It was another for the former Grand Dragon to break bread and share the cup with someone whose race he had despised. And he knew, too, in that moment, that everyone in the church would be able to see if things went wrong.

The pastor's breath caught in his chest—you could feel it catch again as he retold it. The hope he had for the church he'd witnessed that night. As communion was offered by the kind and generous new elder, the pastor saw two hands of different nationalities touch, and he watched as the older man's posture shifted to one of gratitude as he received the grace passed to him. Somehow, in the sharing of that meal, divisions fell away. It gave him hope. Hope that people can change; hope that the church is ushering in God's kingdom; hope that the work he witnessed was more than the fruit of his own labor. Only Jesus could wipe away boundaries like that. Only Jesus could heal the hate in an old man's heart. Only Jesus could offer himself that we might be transformed.

Ten men were healed. One man turned back. No one would have blamed him if he'd run on with the rest. But he's not like the rest. A pronouncement from a priest won't make him clean because in Galilee he will always be unclean, an outsider. To his neighbors, he will never fit in. Yet somehow, he is exactly the one who shows how to live as though we are on the inside. Somehow, he shows us how to respond with thanksgiving and praise.

As Paul Duke describes, the story moves like worship itself. Ten people face Jesus, and ten voices call his name and cry out, "Have mercy!" Ten people hear the good news of cleansing. One of them sings a song of praise and bows in thanksgiving at Jesus' feet. And then comes Jesus' benediction: "Rise and go."[iii]

Today is World Communion Sunday. We celebrate and give thanks that in churches around the globe, people of every race and language share one great table. And this table is wide. It is wider than our table. It is wider than a Presbyterian table. And it is great. In our tradition, we say and we believe that this table is a foretaste of the great heavenly table to come.

Nothing was more serious for Luke than a dinner table. At the table, time and again in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus broke bread with tax collectors, sinners, and sex workers. He welcomed children, he touched the untouchable. He gave blessing and benediction to the foreigner.

Around the table that Christ prepares, we give thanks for God's creative power, redeeming love, and sustaining care. With gratitude, we recall Christ's gracious life, saving death, and life-giving resurrection. We enjoy a foretaste of a heavenly banquet to come, when we will break bread and feast with God's eternal realm.

Ten lepers stand at a dutiful distance and call Jesus "Master." One draws close, dares intimacy, and finds his truest self. It is not in his disease, it is not in his ethnicity, it is not even in his religion. It is in the truth that he is a child of God.

And that one discovers what happens when gratitude spills over into love.

[i] Debie Thomas, "Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, Sept 28, 2016.

[ii] Debie Thomas, “A Foreigner’s Praise,” JourneywithJesus.net, posted October 6, 2019.
[iii] Paul Duke, “Down the Road and Back,” *The Christian Century*, 1995.