

A Posture of Gratitude
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
The Reverend Dr. James L. Carter

Reading: Luke 17: 11-19

October 10, 2010

At first look this story from Luke appears to be an easy one to interpret, unlike some others in Luke we have looked at in recent weeks. Here, ten men who happen to have leprosy, most of them members of the Jewish community, seek Jesus' help. They want to be healed. Jesus instructs them to get their Medicare card stamped first, that is, to see the priest first as Jewish law requires. Then they will be free to come back to see him and he will help them. In a short time they are all healed.

Nine of the ten go on their way, happily, we presume. Only one returns from the temple area to thank Jesus for healing him. Jesus replies, "Where are the others? Were not ten healed? Go on your way.

Your faith has made you well (read “whole” or, “redeemed”). It is this foreigner, an outsider not unlike Jesus is an outsider, who understands the magnitude of what has happened. He can do none other than offer his gratitude.

The one who returned was a foreigner, most likely a Samaritan. It is the outsider, the non-Jew, who shows the appropriate response. He expresses his gratitude and shows himself to be a man of deep faith. We think to ourselves, “There is a man whose parents taught him to say thank you when someone does something for him out of generosity.” It also is not lost on us that it is the outsider who shows the response that impresses Jesus. The odd-man out is the one who “gets it.” He knows who Jesus is and believes him to have the power of God. As you can imagine, the Gentiles loved stories like this while the Jewish establishment did not. We are left to decide with which group we will identify ourselves.

I have always thought of myself as one with the Gentile, the one who returns to say “thank you.” But as I reflect on this story once more, in my maturity, I realize that I am more likely to be seen as one with the nine who were members of the religious establishment, the right synagogue, the true faith. Yet my group is the one that doesn’t “get it” in the story and the group that not only fails to say “thank you”, they act as though they deserved this special attention by Jesus for they are “his people.” As much as I would like to think of myself capable of living with courageous faith like that Samaritan, I know I am more inclined to stay with the establishment when considering Jesus. I would be among those who said, “Yes, he is quite remarkable, this Jesus the messiah, but isn’t that his job? If he is who he says he is, the son of God, would you not expect him to be able to heal a leper? That’s what messiahs do, isn’t it?”

If one assumes that Jesus is just “doing his job”, it is not a long reach to think that one is under no obligation to go out of one’s way to express gratitude to someone just doing his job. Jesus, who is about his father’s business, is doing what the establishment has come to expect from him. They believe themselves entitled to such special treatment. It is a risky assumption to make. Does anyone have the right to presume that what God has sent to us, a Savior, is what he or she deserves?

It is the assumption that one *deserves* what God has done for us that leads to the blindness which is foundational to this pattern of entitlement. I am God’s faithful follower, I follow the law religiously, therefore I am entitled to the following: automatic upgrades when traveling, treatment by the best doctors, increases in the value of my financial portfolio, opportunity at the best jobs with the top salaries, etc. You get the idea.

The heretical dimension of such thinking is this: when we assume we are entitled to the goodness God has bestowed on us we are suggesting that we have earned such reward and, therefore, faithfulness and gratitude to God have no role to play in this remarkable development in our lives. The nine healed lepers never even paused long enough to say thank you. They were too engaged in getting on with whatever comes next. They are representative of us in our moments of feeling “we are entitled” to whatever goodness has come our way. One has to put *pride* in one’s own sense of achievement *aside* in order to say, “Thank you, Jesus.” It takes genuine humility to acknowledge that one is in need of what someone else has made possible. Rather than leaving us in a position of weak dependence such expressions of thanks put us in a position of strength, in the company of those who know better than most that they have not achieved *anything* apart from God’s grace. To have the humility to say “Thank you,” is to join the ranks of those who

are most strong. They know that apart from God and their faith in what God can do, they are left among the weak, those most to be pitied as St. Paul put it.

II

When I am in my best Pharisaical frame of mind, adhering to correct doctrine and right behavior, the guys who irritate me most are the minister types who have been late-comers to the call to ministry. These are the ones who pursued another career, say in business, often very successful while making a load of money and then, one day, to everyone's surprise, they announcing that they have got "the call", that they are going to seminary and plan to be ordained. They are usually very smart, gifted at anything they touch and, most irritating of all, more faithful than any of us.

They are the Samaritans, the outsiders in our midst. They know what they *believe* about Jesus, they have actually *listened* to Jesus and they have "turned around" in their ways. They turn from "entitlement thinking" to genuine expressions of gratitude for all the gifts God has sent their way. Not only do they make all the right reflexive moves gladly, they talk willingly about their gifts, all the while giving God the glory for what has been bestowed on them. I hate it whenever I have to deal with these people. They make me feel like such a chump in the church.

Here I am, the one who popped right out of college and into seminary like a good boy, "K through S" as we used to say. I served the church loyally for decades, and this new guy, this latecomer comes in

from the world of business for heaven's sake, and demonstrates more faithful living than I can remember ever thinking about.

It is...it is as though I were a faithful pitcher for the Phillies now in the post season games, always ready to start when the manager calls for me, never late for spring training, always throwing to keep the edge, always ready in the bull pen for a little late inning action. And then this outsider, this foreigner from the Toronto Blue Jays, this Roy Halladay fellow comes down to join our team last year and subsequently out-pitches all of us. Why the other night he pitched a no-hitter against the strongest-hitting team in the National League. The first time anyone had done that since Don Larsen pitched a perfect game in the World Series in 1956.

And here is the hardest part to swallow: he is truly modest about his gifts, works hard to keep fit and is a heck of a nice guy with a lovely family. He is disciplined. He is philanthropic and generous with his time. It's almost more than a regular old line pitcher like me can handle. I hate it when this happens.

And yet, you see, it is the outsider, the late-comer that often has the most to show us about how to do this thing we call discipleship right. That late-comer to seminary is the fellow that you will find serving the urban church in a changing neighborhood that no one else wants to serve. She is the one who goes to the rural church to serve as pastor in order to have a few acres of land, keep a few animals and still have time to teach theology and religion at the college in the next town. Or it is the cabinet maker who turns a weekend hobby into a business. He leaves his teaching post in Communications at one of our finest liberal arts colleges at age 36 in order to follow his passion, building quality

furniture in wood. He is still at it. Once in awhile he even takes a turn speaking in local churches when the pastor is away. He's never forgotten who, and whose, he is.

How about you? Isn't it time to liberate yourself from that confining idea that you have earned everything you call yours? Don't you yearn to join the corps of discovery that gives God the glory, expecting nothing in return, yet ever grateful for the abundant gifts God bestows? Of course you do, as do I. And it really isn't such a long trip from here to there. It requires effort but the effort is not beyond any of us. All it requires is that we pay attention to our posture, like your mother used to teach: only here we strive for a *posture of gratitude* as we turn to God in Christ, thanking the Jesus who has come to heal us and to give us life, grateful for the opportunity that is new for us each morning, giving God the praise, knowing that we are nothing apart from God's grace.

Our preacher friend in Chicago, John Buchanan, reminds us that Karl Barth, the 20th century Swiss theologian, “was fond of saying that the basic human response to God is gratitude—not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. ‘*What else can we say to what god gives us but stammer praise?*’”¹

¹John Buchanan, *Homiletical Perspective in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.4* (Louisville, Westminster/ John Knox Press, 2010) p.165.