

THE LOUD CROWD

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 17:11-19

Our reading today from Luke's gospel is about gratitude and saying thank you. I will admit that I don't say thank you as nearly as often as I should. People do wonderful things for me and each time I have every intention of expressing my full appreciation but sometimes something comes up, I don't see the person, or I forget, and I feel guilty.

It is important to say thank you as is illustrated in this little story:

One day the boss called one of his employees into his office.

"Rob," he said, "you've been with the company for a year now. You started off in the mailroom, one week later you were promoted to a sales position, one month after that you were promoted to district manager of the sales department, and just four short months later, you were promoted to vice-chairman. Now it's time for me to retire, and I want you to take over the company. What do you have to say to that?"

"Thanks," said the employee.

"Thanks?" the boss replied. "Thanks?! Is that all you can say?"

"Okay, okay," the employee said. "Thanks, Dad."

Our reading today is a moving story about gratitude and healing. Luke tells us that Jesus is *on his way toward* Jerusalem, which is a reminder that we are in that section of the gospel known as the Travel Narrative. This section began in Chapter 9 with Luke telling us that Jesus *set his face to go to Jerusalem*. Our reading is set along the border between the Jewish province of Galilee and the not-so-Jewish land of Samaria. The Samaritans were cousins with the Jews but because of their long-time practice of intermarrying with the Assyrians (and other reasons), the Jews looked down on them as heretics and second-class citizens. Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, is in this in-between/neither-nor land of Jews and Samaritans.

As he comes near to one village, ten lepers approach him. Because they are lepers, they keep their distance from Jesus as prescribed by the laws of Leviticus.¹ Lepers are supposed to warn those nearby by calling "unclean, unclean." These ten, however, shout out something different. They shout out *Jesus, master, have mercy on us*.

¹ Leviticus 13:45-46 - The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

When Jesus sees them he says to them, *Go and show yourselves to the priests*. If a person has leprosy (which included any number of diseases of the skin) only a priest could declare them healed and permit them to rejoin society. These ten call out to Jesus for mercy, and he directs them to go to the priests. As they go, they discover they are healed.

That is a beautiful story. We have ten people afflicted with a terrible, life-altering disease. When they encounter Jesus, they call out to him and ask for mercy. Jesus responds with a command which they immediately obey and then they are healed. This story is a model for our faith. When we feel broken or unclean, we can feel free to call out to Jesus.

But there is more to our reading. There is a second story here. After the ten head off to find the priest, they realize they are cured, and one of them turns back and returns to Jesus. As he goes, he is *praising God with a loud voice*. When he finds Jesus, he throws himself at Jesus' feet and thanks him. Why shouldn't he? Until a few moments earlier he had suffered a terrible, debilitating disease that forced him out of home and away from family and community. He survived at the margin of society. Then, with a word, Jesus changes that. Jesus heals him. Jesus restores his life. So why shouldn't he come back and thank Jesus and give praise to God—that God, as we sing, “from whom all blessings flow.”

But the story has a punchline. This man who was healed was not a Jew, he was not a child of God, he was not one of God's chosen people. He was a Samaritan. Like the Samaritan of the parable who stopped to help the man on the road when the priest and the Levite walked by, this Samaritan stops and turns back to Jesus.

To those around him, Jesus asks, *Weren't there ten people who were made clean? Where are the other nine? Did any of them return to give praise to God except this foreigner?* Jesus says to the man, *Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well*. But more than well, the Greek suggests that he is, in fact, saved, that his faith has saved him.

We don't have just one story here. We have two. The first is a straight-forward healing. The other is a story of unexpected gratitude.

To be perfectly clear, the nine did nothing wrong. In fact, they did exactly as Jesus instructed. Jesus said, *Go present yourselves to the priests*, and they did. The implication is that these nine were Jews, and Jews follow the Law—those hundreds of rules which defined their relationship to God.

Within these rules are plenty of opportunities for praising God. For example:

Psalms 150: Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Psalm 95: O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Deuteronomy 10:21: He is your praise; he is your God,
who has done for you these great and awesome things.

1 Chronicles 16:9: Sing to him, sing praises to him,
tell of all his wonderful works.

The Jewish Law offers many opportunities for praising God. But for some reason, the need for praise and joy had been misplaced. Maybe the Jews felt that they were expressing appropriate thanks by simply following the rules. Maybe the obligation to keep the Law overshadowed the desire to give thanks and praise.

LUKE

So what is the lesson here for us in this story? Is it that we are to praise God? Absolutely! But there is more. First, we have to ask the question we've been asking through Luke: "Why did Luke include this story in his gospel of Jesus? He is the only gospel to tell this story. Clearly, he sees in it something special, a unique message for his people.

As we know, Luke is the leader of a congregation of mostly Gentiles in a city outside of Israel about fifty years after the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. As non-Jews, I imagine Luke's people felt self-conscious about their faith. Can they follow this God if they are not Jews—God's so-called "chosen people"? Through this story and others Luke is working to assure his people that they are as deserving of a relationship with God as anyone, even the Jews. Do you recall how Jesus called Levi the tax collector to follow him, how Jesus healed the slave of the Roman centurion, how he forgave the sins of the sinful woman? Here, it is the Samaritan—Jesus calls him a foreigner—who is the one who returns and praises God, who expresses more thanksgiving, praise, and joy than those who were God's "children." This impure foreigner, this outsider, this outcast was not only healed, but he was saved. *Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you.* This is what Luke is teaching his congregation. Don't listen to the critics. You are worthy; you are deserving; you are a child of God.

Now, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that most of us do not feel that we are foreigners to God. Most of us are comfortable, church people. If we weren't born in this church, then we probably have roots in a church not unlike this with similar worship, beliefs, and people. I remember the first time that my father walked in to this room/the sanctuary and he said, "I grew up in this church." He meant that his

childhood church—Central Presbyterian in Mobile—was architecturally identical to our building. He felt at home.

But just because we are comfortable here does not allow us to be complacent in our faith. Following God's commands is good, but don't be afraid to show some joy, to get loud in praising God. We should be shouting in thanksgiving for all God gives us—for our lives, our daily bread, forgiveness, the promise of salvation.

I'm reminded of one of my favorite church stories.

During a Lutheran worship service a man began to be moved by the Spirit. Out loud he said "Amen!" People around him were a little disturbed. Then louder he said, "Hallelujah!" A few more people were becoming disturbed. Louder still he shouted "Praise Jesus!"

An usher moved quickly down the aisle. He bent over and whispered to the man, "Sir! Control yourself!"

The man exclaimed, "I can't help it. I got religion!!!"

To which the usher responded, "Well, you didn't get it here!"

The second lesson for us in this story is that while many of us may be comfortable in our relationship with God, not all of us are. There may be some here who for whatever reason feel estranged from God, who don't feel that they are worthy or maybe that God has left them. They may be here with us now or more likely have drifted away. Our joy should be based on the fact that none of us are worthy; we are all sinners. But because of God's love and grace we are accepted. We are saved. This is what we should be shouting for joy about, throwing ourselves at Jesus' feet and shouting Hallelujah, God loves us. We should be reaching out to those who feel broken, or lost, or unclean, who feel like foreigners in God's land, who feel like lepers cut off from the world.

That is your homework this week—to look around you and notice these people. You don't have to do anything right away—just pray for them and keep them in your thoughts.

We are not members of a small, exclusive club. Everyone is welcome to join us, to share in the joy of being God's people. If we want the world to know the joy of God, then we need to be loud. Amen.