

Hespeler, 9 October 2022 © Scott McAndless – Thanksgiving Sunday

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, Psalm 66:1-12, 2 Timothy 2:8-15, [Luke 17:11-19](#)

I was a Samaritan – a Samaritan who lived in a narrow strip of land that was a kind of cultural no man's land that ran along the border between Galilee and Samaria. Most of the people who lived there were Judeans who had been brought in to displace us centuries ago. But my family had somehow managed to remain there.

And, surrounded by a sea of Jewish people, we did what we could to hold onto our Samaritan culture and faith. We worshiped the God of Israel in our own way on Mount Gerizim. We followed our own laws according to our own scriptures that we also believed came to us from Moses.

A Despised People

But the Judeans didn't care about any of that. They despised us, called us infidels and accused us of strange practices. They would not speak to us, and they certainly wouldn't do things like share meals with us. So, I was pretty much used to being considered an outcast by most of the people I met from my youth.

And you need to understand that people like me, people who have been treated as outsiders their whole life, have a tendency to fall into certain patterns. You get used to people saying things like that you are lazy, uncouth and rude. You start to believe it about yourself.

And then you start to hypercorrect. You go out of your way to be deferential and polite to the people who are constantly criticizing you. You are always saying please and thank you and praising people who have done little more than be slightly civil to you. It can be exhausting. And worst of all, no matter how much you do it, you know that you will never belong. That was the life I was used to. And then things got so much worse.

Doubly Outcast

One day my entire world fell apart. I woke up to discover strange blotches on my skin. They itched and they burned and nothing I could do would make them go away. My family looked upon me with horror and cried out that I was a leper.

Once that had been settled, everybody knew what came next. Before the sun had set, I had been expelled from my home and the small Samaritan village where we lived. From now on, everyone who saw me would recoil with fear. Anyone who approached me, I was required to call out to them, to announce that I was unclean and that they must shun me. I was expected to live outside of all society. If I was lucky, I might be able to stay alive by begging, but, honestly, few people seemed to care whether I lived or died.

A New Community

And then, there was a miracle of sorts. I wandered around a fair bit in those days and, in my wandering, I passed through the outskirts of one of the larger towns in the region. People like me tended to congregate in the graveyards and garbage dumps that surrounded such places. And that was where I came upon the others. There were nine of them – men and women, old and young. Each one was suffering from a skin condition of some sort. Somehow, in the common experience of being cast out, they had discovered that



the things that had once divided them – differences in wealth, status, age and even gender – no longer mattered nearly as much. Abandoned by everyone else, they had found a community with each other.

But even as I looked at them, it seemed to me impossible that there could be a place in such a group for me. They all had one thing, apart from their disease, in common. They were all Judeans and that had to be more important than any bond they might feel because of their shared condition. I felt certain that my Samaritaness was one thing that they would be simply unable to overlook. So, I turned and prepared to go on my way.

But they called out to me. When I explained who I was and where I came from, they said that it didn't matter. They had all been rejected by the people around them. None of them belonged anywhere. But, in that situation, they had all found something. They had found each other, and they now had a community. If I was willing, there was a place in it even for a Samaritan like me. And so I joined them.

The Healer from Nazareth

One day several weeks later, one of our group came back to wake the rest early in the morning as we slept on the outskirts of a village. He had been restless and unable to sleep as his hives had been particularly bothering him of late. He rose in the early darkness and went down to the well hoping that he could bathe his sores before anyone came out of town to chase him away.

But the space around the well was not empty as he had hoped. Several men had gathered there early and were preparing for their day as they talked excitedly among themselves. The leper drew as near as he dared, hiding behind bushes so as not to be seen. And so, he had heard what it was they were so excited about.

"It is the healer," he announced to us. "It is that man from Nazareth who has been seen everywhere in recent months performing wonders and miraculous healings. It is said that he is going to pass through this region this very day. My friends, we have to speak to him. They say he is compassionate and caring even to people like us. I believe that if anyone can make us clean, it is him."

Not all of us shared the same enthusiasm as our brother leper. I myself felt particularly doubtful. Oh, I did not doubt that such a man *could* do something for people in our situation, but a lifetime of people refusing to do anything for me because of who I was had left me skeptical that he would. But we had all formed a pact. Where one went, we all went together. And I was not about to break the only solidarity I had ever found in my life. We decided that we would go and beg this man for help before he entered the nearby village.

Jesus' Strange Response

And so we found him. As he approached the village, we began to call out together, "**Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!**" It was the last thing we would ever do in unison. He looked up and he saw us. And when he did, he said, "**Go and show yourselves to the priests.**"

Now, you're probably wondering, like I did, what that was supposed to mean. To my ear it almost sounded as if he was brushing us off. According to the Jewish law, after all, it fell to the priests to examine anyone who claimed that their skin condition had healed up and determine whether it was true or not. So, was Jesus simply saying that it wasn't up to him to say whether we were clean or not – that there was nothing that he could do?

So it seemed to me. And I was hardly even disappointed as I turned away with the others. But, before we had gone very far at all, something began to happen. One by one, my fellow lepers began to shout out.

One declared that his itching had stopped. Another said that the scales on her arms had fallen away, and the skin underneath looked pink and smooth. Soon the truth was inescapable to all of us – it seemed, somehow, that we were clean!

Excluded Again

As they realized this, all of the others began to speak together about what they were to do next. What Jesus had said was true. They needed to be seen by a priest before they could return to their families and villages and resume their lives. They began to talk excitedly together about making the trip all the way to Jerusalem.

But as soon as they began to speak practically about their journey, I felt a familiar sinking feeling in my stomach. My skin might have felt like that of a newborn baby, but I felt as if I was dying inside. For, as they spoke of the journey, they simply took it for granted that they would not take the shortest route because that would mean passing through Samaria and no good Judean would ever think of associating with Samaritans.

They didn't even realize that they were doing it. All of a sudden, now that the one thing that the ten of us had had in common was gone, it was as if I no longer existed. I tried to tell myself that it didn't matter. I mean, there was no way that I could go with them to see a Judean priest in Jerusalem anyways. I would not have been welcome there. But I will tell you something. It really hurt and I don't think I've ever felt more alone than I did as I watched them head off on their journey without even realizing that they had left me behind. I looked around and wondered what I was supposed to do now.

The Leper Returns

Just a few minutes after Jesus enters the village – even as the local crowd is beginning to form – everyone is surprised to see a man run through the gate shouting praise to God at the top of his voice. As he approaches Jesus, he throws himself to the ground in an extreme display of gratitude. It is one of the lepers who had accosted Jesus earlier.

And when Jesus sees him, he cannot help but ask the obvious question. **“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?”** Because it is plain to everyone at this point what it is that sets this man apart from his fellows other than his gratitude. They can tell that he is a Samaritan. Don't ask me how. Bigots always find a way. And once the bigoted mode of thinking has been engaged, you can know absolutely that people are going to find some way to complain about how the outsider group behaves.

Judgement

So, they look at this individual who is an outsider for two reasons. He is a leper and he is a Samaritan. And they note that he is the only one out of his group of lepers who has done what they consider to be the right thing and said thank you to Jesus. But, of course, they are not about to praise a Samaritan for doing the right thing, that goes against all logic of bigotry. And so, they choose, instead, to target the other outsider group: lepers.

“Ah, isn't that typical. These lepers are constantly bothering us with their needs and disrupting our lives with their sickness and uncleanness. And here somebody does something nice for them and out of ten, only one can even bother to come back and say thank you.”

Jesus' Response

But I would just like you to note that Jesus' response to this man was a little bit different. First of all, Jesus did not even remark that he was the only one to say thank you. I'm not sure that Jesus really cared about being thanked. What he did notice, however, was that this one, the outsider, the Samaritan, was the only one who knew how to give proper glory to God. And when he said to him, **"Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well,"** he was definitely doing more than brushing him off.

He was recognizing that he was different from the others, that he couldn't go off and show himself to a priest in Jerusalem. And so, Jesus gave him an extraordinary gift, Jesus stood in the place of the priest and declared him clean right there. But more than clean, he declared him acceptable, whole and included and that was something that that man had rarely experienced in his life.

How we Talk about Thanksgiving

This is Thanksgiving Day, and it is, in many ways a celebration of the act of Thanksgiving. Bringing an attitude of gratefulness to our lives is a very good thing. It can help to change so much about our approach to life in positive ways. And we do have much to be thankful for.

But I've got to tell you something. Many of the discussions I hear about thankfulness these days are not quite as affirming as that. Most of the time, when I hear people talk about thankfulness, they are complaining. They are complaining about how certain people are not thankful in the ways that they think they should be.

The groups that people complain about vary, of course. Sometimes it's young people who don't say thank you in the right way. Sometimes it is people in society who are receiving some sort of help or assistance. Sometimes it is certain racial groups or minority groups who people criticize for complaining about how they have been treated. So often our discussion about thankfulness is all about how we think that certain people just aren't good enough at it.

More than Thankful

And I think that this story in the gospel can help us to unpack that a bit. It is a story of a double outsider – a leper who also happens to be a Samaritan. And people have tended to turn it into a reason to complain about people who are not sufficiently thankful. I'm convinced Jesus didn't see that man that way. Jesus simply celebrated him for who he was and how he gave praise to God.

The thankfulness that that man exercised; Jesus didn't need it. It was only for the benefit of the man who experienced gratitude. I hope you can celebrate gratitude yourself this Thanksgiving. But if you encounter people whose gratitude is not exactly what you expected or not expressed in the way you are accustomed to, that really has nothing to do with you. It might be their loss. But if you choose to treat people like Jesus did, take them as they are and celebrate whatever they have to offer, I think you can experience something wonderful both for yourself and for them this Thanksgiving.