

“Be The One”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
Thanksgiving Day – 24 November 2011
Luke 17:11-19

Leprosy, as we know it, is a tragic debilitating disease, a gradual yet relentless wasting away of the body. However, when the Bible refers to leprosy, it refers to any one of number of skin diseases that are thought to be a sort of sinful sacrament: an outward a visible sign of an inner and spiritual flaw. As such, lepers were considered unclean. Contact with them could not only infect another person physically, but it could contaminate a person spiritually. Hence, lepers were exiled from their homes, their families and friends, sent away until the skin lesions disappeared, or if they didn't, as permanent outcasts, doomed to the society of the similarly afflicted.

This was the life of the ten lepers Jesus encountered on his way to Jerusalem. They were waiting, hoping to get well, so that they could return to work, the people they loved, and a normal life. When these ten saw Jesus, they called out to him, desperate for healing. Had Jesus been an ordinary person, he would have passed by, unable to help and unwilling to take the risk of being polluted. Fortunately for them, though, Jesus was not an ordinary person, and he stopped and showed them mercy.

Once a leper became well, the procedure to follow was to seek out a priest to certify their cure. Only then could they go home. And this is precisely what Jesus instructed them to do. We can only imagine the eagerness with which they sought out this confirmation that their period of confinement was over. Afterwards, presuming the priest gave the sought after permission, the former lepers rushed back to resume their lives. Their excitement at the prospect must have been

overwhelming, so perhaps we can forgive the forgetfulness of the nine who failed to find Jesus and give him their gratitude.

But one of the ten, just one, delayed his gratification and took the time to locate Jesus to offer him thanks. That single man was a Samaritan. This is significant because Samaritans and Jews didn't get along, and Jesus and his disciples were Jews. The bad blood went back a long way, several centuries. The Jews viewed Samaritans as toadies to the Babylonians who had conquered Judah in the 6th Century B.C. The two groups also interpreted the Bible differently in ways that were mutually offensive. Yet it was the Samaritan that sought out Jesus to thank him for his healing, for his liberation from exile.

Jesus wondered where the other nine were, and he wonders still, "Where are the rest that I have healed and made clean and set free?" For every day, including this day set aside for thanksgiving, plenty of people abide in a state of the most unbecoming ingratitude. Some view themselves as self-made. All that they are, all that they have, they have earned, without any help from anyone. They deserve the blessings of life. Others find little to be thankful for, in part because so much is taken for granted. Even more float through life oblivious to the fact that gratitude is due. And those with the grace to feel appreciative often harbor a vague sense of gratitude not directed to Jesus. These sins of self-deception and general forgetfulness need to be avoided.

However, each of us can be the one out of many who can resist the temptation to rush on to the next thing, attractive though it may be, and pause to offer thanks to Jesus for the remarkable gift we have received. We can choose, on this Thanksgiving Day and every day, to return gratitude for how Jesus has healed us and made us whole. We can stay aware of how each

morsel of the feast we partake comes from the sun and rain, for which we can claim no credit, and how each breath we draw originates from the life that God only possesses and shares.

Our sense of gratitude is magnified when we consider, in addition those natural blessings, the supernatural power Jesus has exercised on our behalf. Without him, our souls would be empty, crude and without hope. Yet Jesus, through his suffering and sacrifice, has opened for us a path of reconciliation with God, so that our sins might be forgiven and our lives made spiritually abundant in the here and now and everlasting in the hereafter.

Confronted with the enormity of what Jesus has given us, we may wonder at how any prayer or tangible gesture might constitute adequate thanks. But the wonder of Jesus' generosity is that a simple show of gratitude is sufficient, and that our gratitude reveals yet another gift given, which is faith. When the Samaritan leper came back, Jesus told him "your faith has made you well." That faith, which recognized the healing power of Jesus, that faith, which inspired the Samaritan to return, that faith is both the origin and the fruit of our gratitude.

In other words, faith is what we truly give thanks for, and faith is what enables us to give thanks in the first place. And that faith is a gift we receive from Jesus. It is not something we earn or deserve. It is not a virtue of our discipline or a creature of our own creating. Faith is the relationship Jesus establishes with us, and when we respond, it is a gift received, appreciated, and exercised.

This is Paul's point in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, where he writes, "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." To put it simply, faith is the gift that when used grows, and the best way to share our gratitude, the best way to acknowledge and give thanks for the faith we have been granted, is to share that faith with others. It is the holy grail of renewable

energy: the more faith we use, the faith we have. And when we use our faith, it inevitably spreads to others, making the magnification ever larger.

There are more ways to share our faith than there are stars in the night sky, but each is strikingly similar in that it involves giving ourselves to others, just as Jesus has given himself to us: without reserve, precondition, or ulterior motive. And perhaps since it was a Samaritan who showed his faith by returning to Jesus, part of the gospel message is for us to reach out to those different from ourselves, people with whom we have bad blood, to strive for reconciliation and forgiveness.

The choice that faces us, moment by moment, is whether we shall be among the nine or among the ones, so stirred by the mercy of Jesus, that we seek him out and find him, showing our faith strong and making our faith stronger each time we share it with another. Amen.