



The New England Church Pulpit

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THE POWER OF THANKS

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Luke 17.11-19

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approach him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us! When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "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?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Sarah Hoidahl is a waitress at Ruby Tuesdays in Concord, New Hampshire. The afternoon shift last Wednesday was an ordinary one until she waited on two National Guard service members who had come in for lunch. While taking their order, Sarah learned that because of the government shutdown, they were furloughed, without pay. Sarah, a single mother with a 15-month-old, said she knew what it meant to have to make ends meet when the income is small and the expenses loom large. So she decided to say thanks for their service to our country by picking up their lunch tab. That gesture of gratitude to these two women has gone viral on the internet. That \$30 lunch tab changed the lives of these women as if it were a million dollars, and it has empowered Sarah in ways she could not have imagined, just because she said "thank you."

I often say at wedding ceremonies that being thankful is one of the secrets of happiness, not only in relationships but in life; that we bring nothing with us into the world and we take nothing out, but to be thankful for every little thing is the secret to joyful, abundant living.

We have all known people, have we not, who, even in the worst of circumstances, have found something for which to be thankful. Without being Pollyannaish or superficial, these are people who have genuinely seen the silver lining in the darkest of thunder clouds.

In this story Jesus told about the ten who were healed and the one who returned to give thanks, there are a number of facets through which the brilliance of this anecdotal gem shines. Take the nine who didn't return, for example. One theologian conjectured that these nine weren't so much ungrateful as they were busy. And while that seemed like a flimsy excuse when I first pondered it, I remembered the several times even in the last month when I intended to thank someone for a special gesture, or for a helpful deed, or for hosting a party, and didn't do it because my schedule kicked into high gear

and my brain went into neutral. And I realized it's true. One forgets to express thanks even though one is very grateful.

It's also possible that in their exuberance, the first thing they thought about was going home to their family that they hadn't seen in years; going to tell the neighbors; going to the pub to lift a pint in celebration of new life. I've often thought that the best thank you I could ever get from a child to whom I'd just given a gift was the exuberance of ripping it open and running away to play with it. There are different ways of saying thank you, and at one level, we could say that Jesus was being a little too hard on the nine.

But Jesus is making another point here as well. It was not only about one coming back, but that this one was the despised foreigner among them. The disease had been the bonding point for nine from one culture and an odd man out, providing, against their desire and against social custom, a common ground. All were ostracized from society because of this disease, providing an uncomfortable but necessary bond for survival. But as James Liggett points out, it is the foreigner who perhaps sees more clearly after the cleansing. The others have something to go back to, a society to return to, a general acceptance that allows them to pick up where they left off. This one who returned to give thanks wasn't as distracted with what they were going back to and so realized more keenly the presence of Jesus and the value of the gift.

(James Liggett, Sermon Reviews, Lectionary Homiletics, 10/13/13).

Another facet that brings meaning to this story is the non-entitlement of the one who returned to say thanks. This foreigner, who knows what it's like to be relegated to the margins, to be shunned and teased and bullied and ridiculed felt more keenly the caring, the acceptance, and the wholeness that accompanied the healing. The one who was kept at a distance even before his disease is more mindful of the change, especially as it was effected by someone in the very society that had marginalized him. (Jill Edens, Lectionary Homiletics, 10/13/13). This one who returned received an extra blessing, for not only is his disease eradicated, he is well. He is whole.

Dominic Crossan makes the distinction between disease and illness. Disease, he says, is what happens to your body when it malfunctions or a virus takes over. Illness, on the other hand, is the social aspect of the disease whereby the person who is sick is shunned by a society. Jesus demonstrates that the kingdom of God is in the business of wholeness, providing acceptance, inclusion and caring even in the midst of diseases we can't cure. This one who returned, this foreigner, provides Jesus with the chance to make the point: your faith has made you well; has made you whole; has given you life that transcends the cure. And we only have to recall those in our circle of knowing who are models of grace and calm even in the midst of their painful and debilitating disease.

The various facets that reflect the brilliance of this text are a collective reminder of the power of being thankful. Being thankful rather than bitter changes the way we look at things.

Two men looked out from prison bars; one saw mud and the other saw stars.
Those who are mindful, those who are thankful for every little thing have found one of the secrets to happiness.

I couldn't help but be reminded during our two weeks in Ireland, that the Irish are generally a thankful people. When the sun is shining, they're grateful for the absence of rain. When it's raining, they're grateful for water that will nourish the earth. When it's warm they're grateful for the effect it will have on the people and the animals and the forty shades of green; when it's chilly, they're grateful for the crisp refreshment that puts a spark and a sparkle in your step. It's always a great day in Ireland, whether you're in the pub or out of it.

When we say thank you, when we live with gratitude in our actions as well as our words, the Word is made flesh for both giver and receiver. In the "thank you," relationship develops and mindful dialogue engages human beings; community is created; joy just naturally evolves. Sarah Hoidahl and the two servicewomen realized it. Those who see stars instead of mud know it by heart. All of this changes one's relationship with God, with one another and within our self. "Thank you" reminds us that life isn't fundamentally about me or my needs but about a world with which God is besotted. It is the intersection of heaven and earth, or perhaps even of heaven and hell. A lifestyle of thankfulness becomes the vortex of a peaceful, abundant life.

Tecumseh Shawnee Chief offers these words of wisdom:

When you arise in the morning, give thanks for the light; for your life; for strength. Give thanks for your food and the joy of living. If you see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies with yourself.

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is "thank you," it will be enough. (Meister Eckhart)
Amen.

--Gary L. McCann