

Proper 23 C Sermon
Luke 17:11-19
October 9, 2022

“What Really Saves”
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¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

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Author Nick Ortner tells this story:

A blind boy sat on the steps of a building with a hat by his feet. He held up a sign which read, “I am blind, please help.” There were only a few coins in the hat – spare change from folks as they hurried past. A man was walking by. He took a few coins from his pocket and dropped them into the hat. He then took the sign, turned it around, and wrote some words. Then he put the sign back in the boy’s hand so that everyone who walked by would see the new words.

Soon the hat began to fill up. A lot more people were giving money to the blind boy. That afternoon, the man who had changed the sign returned to see how things were. The boy recognized his footsteps and asked, “Were you the one who changed my sign this morning? What did you write?” The man said, “I only wrote the truth. I said what you said but in a different way.” I wrote, “Today is a beautiful day, but I cannot see it.”

Both signs spoke the truth. But the first sign simply said the boy was blind, while the second sign conveyed to everyone walking by how grateful they should be to see...¹

It seems so obvious, doesn't it? And yet, how often do we walk through life with conscious awareness of the gift of sight, or sound, or smell, or touch, or taste? How often do we revel in the goodness of a relationship, the tenderness of a child's embrace, the feel of icy snow flurries on our noses, the sound of rain on pavement, or even the simple joy of tasting that perfect cup of rich black coffee? These are simple things, ordinary things—simple, ordinary, beautiful things. What keeps us from noticing them?

This morning, I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about gratitude.

In our reading from Luke's gospel, ten people, sick with leprosy, called out to Jesus for mercy. He responded, telling them to go and show themselves to the priests. This may seem strange to us, but in those days, people who were sick with leprosy lived “in the shadows. They subsist[ed] in a no-man's-land, ‘a region between.’ According to the customs of the day, they live[d] in seclusion, ke[pt] their distance from passersby, sport[ed] torn clothes and disheveled hair, and announce[ed] their own contagion in loud, humiliating cries: ‘Unclean! Unclean!’”²

¹ Nick Ortner. “A Short Lesson on Gratitude,” [Thetappingsolution.com](https://www.thetappingsolution.com/blog/short-lesson-gratitude/), <https://www.thetappingsolution.com/blog/short-lesson-gratitude/>.

² Debie Thomas. “A Foreigner's Praise,” [JourneyingwithJesus.net](https://www.journeywithjesus.net), October 6, 2019, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2395-a-foreigner-s-praise>.

Only a priest could declare that someone with leprosy was *clean*—was healthy again. As they went, Luke tells us that the sickness left their bodies, they became *clean*, enabling “their safe return to all that makes us fully human—family, community, companionship, and intimacy.”³ Realizing this, one of them returned to Jesus, threw himself on the ground, and thanked Jesus for making him well. And then, Jesus says something interesting: “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Why is that interesting, you may wonder. Ten people living with a horrible and isolating disease were made clean, but only one, it seems, was *made well*. The Greek word translated in our bibles as “made well” is the word *sozo*. It “can indeed be translated as ‘made well,’ in the sense of being healed. But it can also be translated as ‘saved,’ in the sense of being brought through mortal danger. And it can be translated as ‘made whole,’ in the sense of being completed and made to be what you were meant to be all along. So ten were indeed made clean, but only one was saved. Ten were made clean, but only one was made whole. Ten were made clean, but only one recognized it and gave thanks and, in giving thanks”⁴ was saved, made whole, made *truly* well. It was gratitude that did that.

Too often we boil gratitude down to the requisite recitation of two simple words, ‘thank you,’ but Luke believes that real gratitude has more power than just placating the ones who raised us with good manners. Gratitude makes us well, makes us whole, saves us. Far from being a glib thank-you, real gratitude that makes us well, that makes us whole, is a habit, is a way of life, and it really does have the power to save us.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David Lose. “The Secret,” Davidlose.net, October 10, 2019, <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/10/pentecost-18-c-the-secret/>.

Interestingly, modern science corroborates Luke’s nearly two-thousand-year-old claim about the power of gratitude. In fact, here are seven scientifically proven benefits of gratitude:

1. Gratitude opens the door to more relationships.
2. Gratitude improves physical health.
3. Gratitude improves psychological health.
4. Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression.
5. Grateful people sleep better.
6. Gratitude improves self-esteem.
7. Gratitude increases mental strength.⁵

Gratitude is good for us! Conversely, though, ingratitude is poison. Robert Emmons, leading expert on the study of gratitude, states that, “People who are ungrateful tend to be characterized by an excessive sense of self-importance, arrogance, vanity, and an unquenchable need for admiration and approval. [They] reject the ties that bind people into relationships of reciprocity. They expect special favors and feel no need to pay back or pay forward.”⁶

According to Emmons, the cure for ingratitude is humility. He writes that, “Humility is a key to gratitude because living humbly is the truest approach to life. Humble people are grounded in the truth that they need others. We all do. We are not self-sufficient. We did not create ourselves. We depend on parents, friends, our pets, God, the universe and yes, even the government, to provide what we cannot provide for ourselves. Seeing with grateful eyes requires that we see the web of interconnection in which we alternate between being givers and receivers. The humble person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed.”⁷

⁵ Amy Morln. “7 Scientifically Proven Benefits of Gratitude,” Psychologytoday.com, April 3, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-mentally-strong-people-dont-do/201504/7-scientifically-proven-benefits-gratitude>.

⁶ Robert Emmons. “What Gets in the Way of Gratitude?” Greatergood.berkeley.edu, November 12, 2013, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_stops_gratitude.

⁷ Ibid.

In humility, the former-leper in Luke's gospel returned to express gratitude to Jesus for the healing he experienced. And that gratitude, saved him and made him truly whole. Perhaps you are like that man and gratitude is the space you inhabit in life. Or perhaps, like me, you need to be reminded to inhabit gratitude, to occupy humility, and to pay grace forward. However we come to this story today, it is my prayer that we will all go forward in gratitude, for all of life is truly a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed. May it be so, with us all. Amen.