

GIVE THANKS WITH A GRATEFUL HEART

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I was a leper.

Lepers are ostracized – sent to live outside the city in remote places where no one can come in contact with them

Lepers are highly contagious, and our skin is terrible to look at. First the skin gets red and lumpy and then it turns white like a scale and begins to eat away at our bones and internal organs. We are in constant pain. We dye an excruciating death...slow, painful and alone.

I am a leper, yes, but I am also a Samaritan. Another level of outcast as far as the Jews are concerned.

So I have to admit, calling out to the Jewish Rabbi Jesus to heal me was something I never imagined I would ever do. Jews and Samaritans have no dealings with each other...a completely different kind of faith practice...

And to the Jews we are all unclean...whether leprous or not They ostracize us; they wont eat with us – and we wont eat with them There is a long history to our antagonistic relationship

Yet in that leper community, all of us were unclean and the distinctions that separated us before our illness were gone. I hung with the leprous Jews, they with me...and we helped each other survive...

It was late in the afternoon when we saw Jesus that day We had been out of the caves for a few minutes collecting some firewood...

He happened to be passing by – just by chance we noticed him We had heard about his miracle working power; everyone knew about him...he kept changing lives wherever he went

And we saw him on the road that runs between Galilee and Samaria on his way to Jerusalem, about ready to enter a small village...with his disciples

We were not allowed inside any village – as I said we were relegated to the wilderness places, living in caves; finding food where we could
Yes...I never thought I would call out to a Jewish rabbi for help; but I also never thought my life would end like this, scraping for survival in the wilderness, as a leper

What did I have to lose calling out to a Jewish Rabbi.

It's funny how when you are desperate, you'll try anything.

So with the rest of them, I too cried out to Jesus for help.

There were ten of us that day in a small cluster covering our distorted faces in rags and from a distance calling as loudly as we could to get this Jewish rabbi's attention.

We couldn't go close because, as I said, we were highly contagious
We just pled with him for mercy as loudly as we could;
We must have been a sight...our bodies ravaged and decaying with disease...a pathetic band of beggars with distorted faces and bandaged limbs, on the threshold of death itself.

I remember that he stopped in his tracks as he was about to enter the village – (we obviously had interrupted him) –to turn back and look at us - standing behind him, calling from a distant hill.

He did not approach us.

He simply called back to us.

“Go, and show yourselves to the priests.” His voice was calm and commanding.

Just that one sentence.

Then he continued on into the village.

Okay. That would mean we would have to go into the city – into Jerusalem, which was still a ways away. We looked down at ourselves. We were leprous still – not healed.

It seemed he wanted to get rid of us.

Send us away so that we wouldn't annoy him anymore with our sad voices crying out from a distant hill.

Still we set out to Jerusalem, to the temple, hoping against hope that somehow we would be healed.

What else did we have? Where else could we go?

I knew this was a religious practice for the Jews – it is what Jewish people did when they believed a healing had occurred.

If they got sick they went to the priest, and he would validate their illness and tell them what to do.

When they got well, they would also go to the priest and he would validate that they no longer had an illness – and in the case of a healed leper – at that point they would be received back into the community.

But remember - I am a Samaritan. I didn't go to Jewish priests. I wasn't allowed into their Jewish community.

What would those priests do to me when they saw me, a Samaritan, coming to them?

I had no idea.

With doubts and in pain, we hobbled along, holding each other up, leaning on sticks moving slowly forward, plodding arduously toward Jerusalem;

We all knew that if we arrived and were spotted as leprosy outside the walls of that city– we would never be let in.

It seemed like an effort in futility. But we kept going...

Jesus' words were all that we had to hang onto

Would the other nine would be healed and not me, because I was not a Jew? The thought did cross my mind.

Perhaps Jesus hadn't known that I was a Samaritan when he told us to go to the priests.

I continued on, struggling forward in the pained silence of that group, breathing hard, my walking stick stabbing the hard earth with the heavy thud, thud, thud that measured each painful step.

The sun was still low in the sky and I saw its rays slanting sideways over the hills giving the brown grass a golden sheen.

And then...I became aware that my pain was diminishing, and my usual stooped posture was starting to straighten up.

That is when I looked down at myself and saw that the sores on my hands were gone – and then my whole body – I saw that my skin looked normal all over. I had forgotten what *normal* looked like. Skin that was smooth and tan and supple covered me.

Not only me, but all ten of us – had received healing. We all noticed it at about the same time.

We stood staring at ourselves and then looked at each other. We felt energy that we hadn't felt in so long pumping into our veins.

We laughed, and embraced as tears coursed down our faces. We cheered, and the brooding silence of death's illness in us, was replaced by lively chatter.

A few even started to run toward Jerusalem, leaping as they went – shouting out with loud voices.

I started to follow them but then suddenly I stopped.

I couldn't go on.

My heart was so full...so full of gratitude.

I turned and began to run in the other direction...

I heard the nine calling out to me, "Where are you going? We are supposed to go to the priest! We were told to do this!"

Their voices faded as I threw away my walking stick and my feet flew out underneath me.

I was running down the road, back toward the village, back toward Jesus.

I had to see him again. I had to thank him.

He had given me my life back

None of the religious formality meant anything to me.

I wasn't a Jew.

Yet, at that moment, I didn't care what I was.
All I knew was that I wanted to see Jesus - To show myself to *him*
I had hoped against hope that his word was true -
And he hadn't let me down
I wasn't a leper any more.
And even though I was a Samaritan...he hadn't despised me
By his word I had been healed

I ran into the tiny village, calling out – calling his name
He appeared in the doorway of a small mud house as if expecting me
His silhouette in the dusky twilight welcomed me with a nod
I ran to him and threw myself down in the dust at his feet – prostrate
before him
Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I yelled out in a loud voice
I sobbed it...I cried it out...I didn't hold back.
I was so grateful...Why me?

He touched my head and I looked up. He motioned me to rise.
“Where are the other nine?”
I had no idea – probably where he had told them to go – to the priest
in Jerusalem

And then I realized – I too had presented myself to the priest
Jesus was my priest
The one who had interceded for me to God
The one who did not despise me as a Samaritan
The one who had just spoken a word and brought healing and life to
my contorted frame
He was my priest!
The disciples crowded around him now, aware of the drama being
played out before them...
“Did no one come to say thank you”, he asked them, “except this
foreigner?”
They shuffled around a bit, looked at him and at me, and had nothing
to say.

“Go your way,” he said softly to me. “Your faith has made you well.”
My faith? He empowered me! A Jewish rabbi telling a Samaritan that
his faith, the Samaritan's faith was powerful enough to bring healing
to a leprous body on the fringe of death.

My faith?

And then I realized. It wasn't just me – it was my faith in him!
(plodding along doubting and in despair walking to Jerusalem I had obeyed his word...regardless)

And turning around and running to him, the person who was God, is exactly what he had commanded us to do.

I had done the right thing.

I hadn't even realized it.

He was my priest. He was all of our priest – He was the one we were supposed to come running back to; to present ourselves to..

He was the one to whom all gratitude was due, all thanksgiving and all praise...-----

There is so much that can be said about this story.

When we dramatize a story like this we can visualize the scene and it comes to life – doesn't it?

For all that could be said here, and there is so much packed in, I want to focus on the Samaritan leper and what he did that was so right on. And it was right on because he did it all from a grateful heart.

The gratitude he had for his healing just turned him around on his feet and headed him right back to Jesus.

I believe that when we praise God from a grateful heart we will always end up in Jesus' presence.

I believe that when we act from a grateful heart what we do is so often right on...

The baffling thing here is that the nine were probably grateful *too* but not grateful enough to let it overcome their preoccupation.

Think about the word “**preoccupation**”.

It means to be occupied with what is coming next before it gets here.

And so much of our lives in the culture we are in, causes us to be preoccupied with what is coming...*that which we don't have yet.*

We have to go to the priests!

As Christians, as religious people, we can be so worried about doing the next right thing, that we miss the joy of our faith and the deep gratitude to God that comes from that - of having Jesus in our lives.

We are worried about so much that hasn't happened yet – attaining more – doing the next good thing – trying so hard to make everyone happy - and it all may be very good stuff that we are doing...”going to the priests” kind of stuff

But...As we try to be “good” Christians are we missing out on joy? Are we slim on gratitude...for what already has been given to us right now...?

You see, for the Samaritan it was easy...

Cause he didn't know religious protocol! He didn't know the next right thing to do...

He had no idea about priests, and cleansings, and rituals in the synagogue.

He didn't know the next right thing to do in terms of Jewish law and custom.

All he knew was Jesus.

How could he not give Jesus thanks?

How could he hold back his gratitude - when he had been cleansed of leprosy?

It was natural. It was easy. It was the human response to run back and say thank you to the one who had made you whole.

Rescued you from death.

Given you your life back again!

See gratitude can't be forced.

If I stood up here and said “be grateful now...after all, its

Thanksgiving time” it wouldn't create one more drop of gratitude in you than is in you right now

Ever notice how sometimes we sort of categorize things we learn in church in the “ought and “should” category?

Even *going to church* is something we feel we “should” do....or we “have” to do...or we “ought” to do.

Even with Gratitude...we should have it...especially at Thanksgiving

It struck me, how often, when we teach our kids gratitude, we put it in the 'ought' of obligation category. *You ought to be thankful.*

AT THANKSGIVING we might prod our kids...What do you say to Aunt Edna for her Velveeta, Spam, and lima bean casserole...C'mon now...what do you say?

We kind of teach that gratitude is an 'ought' of obligation;

And I will tell you right now....that the shoulds, and the oughts, and the have to's, when used in this way, zap the joy right out of our faith – and they lessen gratitude rather than create more of it...

Gratitude is a spontaneous response. You can't manufacture it. You can't drum it up. It is either there or not there.

I have talked to so many people who were raised with organized religion in a way that made them feel guilty, and wrong ...going to church and believing in God was a joyless exercise that they did out of obligation in order to avoid going to hell.

It was all fear based.

That's the ought, the should, the have to, that can just kill your faith and make you not want to have anything to do with God in your life.

The sad thing is, that when we shut God out of our lives
We miss this magnificent oppty to respond *to who God really is*

Jesus shows the lepers who God really is by healing them
Where are the other nine? Asks Jesus when only the Samaritan came back to say thank you...
Friends, this is not a statement of condemnation
It is one of bewilderment

Why would you miss the gratitude party? Why wouldn't you want to celebrate this miracle together?

What is so important that you would let it rob you of coming to say thank you to me and us rejoicing together in God's goodness?

The irony here of course is that the other nine thought they were doing the right thing.

They were showing themselves to the priests – isn't that what Jesus told them to do?

Now he is asking where they are...

But again...how often does doing the "right thing" out of obligation rob us of the joy of being with Jesus.

I am preaching to myself cause so often the one who tries the hardest to do the right thing, to plan, to make sure I have all my I's dotted and my T's crossed.

But in doing this, as necessary as it may be I often become preoccupied with what's wrong...not what is right

When you are constantly worried about doing the "right" thing all the time, there's something that makes you decidedly ungrateful. That's because all of life is about what I am doing...all of life is about the effort I am expending...and God doesn't have a whole of room to even elbow his way in there and say "Hey...hello...its not about you...its about me."

The truth is that **Acting out of simple gratitude and having no idea of the religious protocol - the Samaritan actually found himself doing exactly the right thing.**

In fact **He did show himself to the priest – Jesus was the priest – the great high priest of all priests.**

It was gratitude that led the Samaritan – to Jesus' feet.

I hope that this thanksgiving gratitude leads you all to Jesus feet...as well...with gratitude pouring from your heart

Just for a moment right now... I want to practice what I preach

I want to be grateful with you for what we have as a church family...
NOW

So often we gather in meetings and in parking lot conversations and talk about what is wrong...

Or what we have to do next as a church

Or what should be happening and what we ought to accomplish

But right now, today, in this moment I want to say I am grateful for what already is...here at WVPC

Just this morning folks...

I am so grateful that Emery and Leo were baptized this morning.

On their own, they came and asked. Completely led by the Holy Spirit they did this amazing thing...What a gift!

I am grateful for the music this morning and how it drew me into the presence of God...

I am so grateful for all of you. For your prayers and your support down through the years. For the volunteer heart that is here and the desire to serve.

Thank you for being Jesus to me and to Tim and to our family so many times. I am grateful...

I am so grateful for the way in which this church is so involved in the community. For the heart all of you have to share Jesus in ways that are tangible and understood to others who don't know God. (In the last week I just received two thank you notes from two unrelated people who have been grateful for things you have done for them...)

I am grateful for the Jesus centered nature of this church; for the integrity of our leadership and the faithfulness of God through it all...

I'd like us all to have a gratitude party right now. (slide "Gratitude Party")

I'd like you to take two minutes and just be grateful together as a people, for what already is.

Get up...move about...and find two other people and tell them something that God has done for you in the past year that has made

a difference in your life – that has made you glad...that has filled your heart with gratitude.

That's all you can talk about...nothing else...just grateful thanksgiving

And let's celebrate together....

Don't miss the gratitude party. Folks - It's right now. Let's go!

(2mins) Let us Pray....