

IMAGINE SECOND

The Only Reason to Give

Luke 17:11-19

November 17, 2024

If you have ever had the joy of teaching Bible stories to children, there's a good chance you know this one. I can still remember the Sunday school felt-board version of this story, the drama as the scene gradually unfolded. Ten cutout lepers (the unclean, the outcast, living in isolation) see their chance as Jesus walks past. So there in the middle of nowhere, they cry out for mercy. Jesus hears their cry, sees them, and gives them what they ask. "Go show yourselves to the priests..." The ones who could confirm their healing and welcome them back to the community. On the way, as they go, they are made clean. They are cured, healed. Nine keep on walking. One stops in his tracks, runs back to Jesus, falls to his knees in praise, gives thanks.

And I remember the lesson. The hero. The moral of the story. This one healed man did the right thing. He said thank you. We too should thank God for the many blessings in our lives. And we should thank others as well, beginning with our parents. It's the polite thing to do.

Now, there is nothing wrong with this tidy message on proper manners, but I do want to suggest this morning that there is more to this encounter than simply a display of proper etiquette, that the text itself points us to something deeper. Return to the response of Jesus to the leper.

Why are you the only one who came back? Get up, go again, your faith has made you well.

The reaction is mystifying to my mind for at least two reasons. First, the other nine did not return to Jesus because they were doing as Jesus directed them. Should they be called out for following instructions? Come on, Jesus!

Beyond that though, what does Jesus mean about the tenth leper being made well?

Didn't that already happen? Wasn't his healing the reason for his outburst of praise and thanks? The order feels off.

To see Jesus' meaning, we need to understand his language. Hang with me here. It's going to get a little nerdy.

In verse 15, when the man discovers that he is cured, the gospel writer Luke uses the Greek verb for physical healing. He is cured of his leprosy. Just the word we would expect. But in verse 19, Jesus changes the meaning when he shifts the verb. Now unfortunately, our translation uses the anemic "made well," but that's not really right. What Jesus says in the original Greek is "you have been *sozo-ed*." *Sozo* means "to be saved" in the divine sense. In the Peter, standing before the crowds at Pentecost, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be *sozo-ed*." Saved. Delivered. Rescued. Freed. Liberated.

Yes, ten lepers are healed. Jesus cures the disease of ten men. But one of them is saved. And I believe the encounter leaves us with an important question. What was distinctive about this one Samaritan leper? What sets him apart? The answer, I believe, is gratitude. It is his gratitude that saves him. Friends, there is a truth here that moves far beyond basic manners. We are all receivers of a gift we did not earn and could never deserve. That gift is grace.

And if you believe it, if you believe that you have received the unearned gift of grace, the question you will spend the rest of your life answering is this: how will I respond? Theologian Karl Barth was fond of saying

that the basic human response to God is not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. Barth wrote, "What else can we say to what God gives but to stammer praise?" Grace evokes gratitude.

And this Commitment Sunday, I want to tell you that gratitude is the only reason to give. That only gratitude will rescue you, save you, from a life centered on acquisition, protective posturing, harmful hoarding, and miserable miserliness. Gratitude is freedom.

My friend Margaret Curtis recently sent me a reflection she wrote for her newspaper out in Arizona. Margaret describes Sunday mornings decades ago when she had the unenviable responsibility of getting four preschool-age children ready for Sunday school and church. One week, just as they were about to walk out the door, she realized she was missing Michael, the youngest. The other siblings turned the house upside down looking for their brother. They called the neighbors, but no one had seen him. Finally, Margaret decided to get in the car and drive around in hopes of spotting her young son walking the streets. It was then that Margaret found Michael in the place she least expected him, asleep in the back seat of the car. Margaret remembers how another son complained about going to church that day. After all, they were already late. Finally, the brother asked, "What do we need God for, anyway?" His older sister thought for a second and then answered, "So that we will have someone to thank for finding Mike." Margaret says no one objected to that answer.

The message of the Samaritan leper who returned to Jesus is this: true gratitude, gratitude that has the power to save us, connects the dots between a gift and its giver.

I've been reflecting this week on the role of faith communities, really of faith itself, in this era of accelerated unraveling. Fear is ascendant. The tensions between us are raw and real. What is the mission and message of the Church for such a time as this? It's a question that congregations like ours need to consider with sober seriousness these days.

Here's one thought drawn from our text and our tradition. At the heart of the Reformed Tradition is an acknowledgment, an awareness, that humankind, on the individual and collective level, is fundamentally broken. A mess. We are desperately in need of salvation. Repair. Healing.

And what's more: we cannot save ourselves. Since we are part of the problem, we cannot on our own be the solution. Like the ten lepers, we must ask God for mercy. I am concerned about a sometimes subtle but still significant shift that has taken place in our self-understanding. As institutions have lost influence, and cynical nihilism has taken hold, we tend to neglect moral formation as a universal human need. Instead, we posture and point fingers. We pretend. We say and perhaps even believe things like: *People like me are basically good. My tribe, my people, my party is basically right. And it's all those **other** people who need to be fixed...or, perhaps even better, vanquished.* In such a context, faith becomes not humble gratitude for undeserved grace, but a weapon wielded against perceived enemies with a different politicized identity. If you think I'm being too extreme, let me suggest that a brief survey of sermons preached in many settings this fall would confirm the appeal of these messages. And even in this blessed place, I occasionally receive requests for sermons that call out people on the "other side" for their failures.

I am convinced that these messages would only deepen our divide. I am persuaded that they will not save us. That in place of the breach, we need a shared identity, a common story. And for people of Christian faith, it is the story of grace. It is the identity of grateful receivers. Gratitude saves us from self-righteousness and resentment. Gratitude changes us, and it unleashes a holy imagination.

This Tuesday, November 19th, is the 186th anniversary of the founding of Second Presbyterian Church in 1838. In the grand sweep of Second's rich history, I'm still a newcomer here on my 2,361st day. But, with the eyes of my heart, with holy imagination, I have a vision of

what the next chapter of our life together can be. A vision grounded in gratitude for our deep roots and of expectation that precisely the faithful leadership we have to offer is more important now than at any time in our history. That what we do together matters now. To live into this vision, it's going to take all of us contributing to the work that God has called each of us to do, and to pursue it together.

So, in advance, let me say thank you three times.

Thank you for who you are. In a time when too many congregations succumb to the temptations of tribalism and only reflect the same deep rifts that we experience in every other part of our common life, you are trying to be something different. A community of faith defined by grace that makes us gracious. I do *not* want to make this sound easy. It is not natural. To seek repair in a time defined by bitter discord is in fact a kind of miracle. I'm not exaggerating when I say that many churches are coming apart or alternatively acquiescing to purely political fault lines. And so, yes, I am grateful for the boldness of your witness to Christ's call and your commitment to the steady work of building relationships.

Second, *thank you for what you do.* If you do not see the impact of what is happening here, rest assured that I do, and it gives me both courage and inspiration. Because of Second Church, real neighbors are having their real needs met every single day. Because of your witness in our city, partnerships are forming that will bring hope out of despair and fresh new possibilities for transformation. Because of your compassion and care, the grieving will find comfort here, the lonely will find friendship, faith will be fortified, the lost will be welcomed home, and the gifts of prayer and song will breathe life into troubled souls.

Thank you for what you do.

Finally, *thank you for the future that you imagine.* At this baptismal font and on these chancel stairs, the story of our future is being written. In the work of our counseling center, preschool, food pantry, ministries of outreach and care. In the bold steps we will take *today* following worship to proclaim our commitment

to emerging generations of faithful leaders, now in their teens, twenties, and thirties. It matters that we dream. In a time when many churches struggle to survive, your commitment is making it possible for us to imagine. It matters. I hear every single week in my work how much it matters to our city and state. How much it matters to our nation and the world God calls us to love.

Last Sunday, I said that every aspect of Second's ministry has seen steady growth since 2020, and that is true. But it is also true that we are not finished yet. Far from it. The vision of our ministry is strong as we enter 2025. But our ability to realize that vision is entirely dependent on our commitment.

As for me and my family, we choose to tithe. We will commit a tenth of our income to support the mission we believe has a transformative impact on the lives of our sons, our city, and our souls. And we are aware that this decision makes us unusual. Even in a time when so many are gifted with unimaginable abundance, statistics would tell us that fewer give generously. We are determined that our lived priorities reflect our deeply held values. We are committed to being stewards of the gifts we have been given.

So, why give? The answer is simple but not easy. The only reason to give is because you have received. The only reason to give is because you are grateful. The tenth leper had it right. Jesus had it right. Allowing your life to be defined by gratitude will save you. So, this morning, give not because you must; give because you are grateful. And you have someone to thank. Amen.