

On his way to Jerusalem, our Lord passed through the region between Samaria and Galilee. This was never a pleasant place for a Jew to travel. There was just too much animosity with the Samaritans. The Jews preferred to avoid them.

As Jesus walked, a group of ten lepers approached him. The group contains a curious mixture. For one thing, both leprous Jews and leprous Samaritans were traveling together. The illness permitted them to rise above their mutual dislike and to bond as suffering human beings. Tragedy, illness, accident, and crisis will sometimes do that.

It needs to be noted that even though they were all called “lepers” in ancient times, the group probably mixed people of differing diseases. In that group might have been some with what we know as Hansen’s disease, true leprosy. But that term applied to a range of other skin rash maladies from extremely contagious impetigo to non-contagious psoriasis. Medicine had not advanced to distinguishing one from another. Without an explanation or treatment for everything from garden variety rash to a disfiguring infection, society acted then as society frequently acts today — with fear, ignorance, and a policy of isolating the afflicted. Leviticus 13 details the rules: lepers must wear torn clothes, stay away from healthy people, and cup a hand over the upper lip and shout, “unclean, unclean” while moving through the city streets.

Even with medical, social, and religious advances, certain illnesses can still evoke such fear that causes the suffering to be isolated, shunned. Luke tells us this group of lepers adhered to the ancient law requiring them to keep a distance from healthy people. From afar they shouted. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Our Lord looked toward them. What a pathetic sight they must have been. Torn clothes, filthy hair, disfigured hands, pain and loneliness etched in their faces. Jesus’ heart warmed and he uttered words they longed to hear. “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” (The law stated that a leper could be pronounced cured only after a priest made a proper skin inspection and gave permission for the leper to return home.) When these ten lepers went to see the priest, indeed, they were clean.

What a day that must have been. How glad children must have been to greet a returning mother. How much rejoicing there must have been when a father reached forth his arms to welcome his child back from the leper ghetto. How happiness must have traveled throughout the region. Ten lepers healed in one day.

The story, however, is not finished. Luke tells us that one of those lepers, who happened to be one of the hated Samaritans, returned to thank Jesus. Apparently, our Lord was quite disappointed in the behaviour of the others for he commented on it. “Were there not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” (v. 17).

Personally, I don’t like to be too critical of the other nine. After all, do they not represent most of us? Today we might identify the nine who did not return as being among those harbouring a lurking sense of entitlement. They believed the healing by Jesus was only what they deserved. At least one or two, after all, had probably been condemned to live in isolation from family and friends for having had psoriasis. That was not fair. All Jesus did was provide a bit of justice. The others probably did have some contagious disease cured including Hansen’s Disease, but are not all people entitled to health? Jesus only gave them what others already had.

Nine out of ten did not return to give thanks. Can you blame them? How frequently do any of us stop to give thanks for the things to which we feel entitled? Some of us even see no need to be thankful for

much of anything. It is very Australian to think, “We are self-made people, behold to neither God nor others.”

In point of fact, we are not self-made people. In the truly important issues, we had no say. We had no choice where we were born, the parents who raised us, and the genes we inherited. For those things, give thanks and see what joy it brings. Strive to be a thankful person and see what a difference it makes in your life.

On the one hand, we have no choice in the gifts we receive, but we do get a choice in how we are going to use those gifts. If you are given opportunity, you have to take advantage of it. If you are given intelligence, you have to discipline it. It is that way with many and perhaps even most things. We have no choice in what happens. We have only a choice in how we will respond. For that reason, our faith recommends responding in thanks. Ninety percent thought they were entitled. Ten percent returned to give thanks. Join the ten percent! It makes such a difference in the way you experience life.

After the comment on the nine who did not return, our Lord turned his attention to this fellow lying flat on his face in front of him. The Master said, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well” (v. 19). What a curious comment. All ten were healed. Could it not be said that the faith of the other nine also made them well? What is happening here? How is this Samaritan leper more “well” than those who did not return to give thanks?

We get some insight when we analyse the phrase Jesus uses. The expression “your faith has made you well” is sometimes stated “your faith has healed you” or even “your faith has saved you.” Let me suggest we unwrap the statement in this manner. There is more to good health than a lack of disease. All ten lepers were certified as having clear skin but that did not mean they were whole, healthy people. It is possible to go to a doctor and get a clean bill of health and still have something significantly wrong with you. You can have cholesterol under 5, blood pressure never beyond 120/80, have not a sign of any disease and still not be a healthy, satisfied person. There is more to wellness than being drug-and disease-free. Wellness, wholeness, salvation requires good mental and spiritual health as well as physical health. One ingredient necessary for wholeness is thankfulness. Nine had clear skin but lacked this. They were not thankful. Here is the thunderbolt teaching from our Gospel today: Without thanksgiving you are never completely well.

Nine lepers took their healing for granted. They decided they were entitled to it. Clear skin was considered an inalienable right. Why give thanks? Rather than being grateful, I suspect at least some spent the rest of their lives complaining about how many years they spent in a leper colony. Yet the one who gave thanks enjoyed a far richer life. Complaining about what went wrong never brings the joy of a thankful heart.

Martin Rinkart was a Lutheran priest in a small German city during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). The enemy laid siege to the city. They ran out of food and people began starving. Then bubonic plague hit them. People died by the hundreds. During the peak of the plague, Rinkart was performing forty funerals a day. Before it was all over, he buried 4,500 of his fellow citizens, including his own wife. Finally, the war ended.

Rinkart did not have a choice about the war, the plague, the famine, or the loss of his wife and most of his friends. He only had a choice in how he was going to respond. When the trumpets announced the signing of a peace treaty, he could have taken it for granted. He could have dismissed it by saying, “It is about time.” Instead, Rinkart sat down and wrote a hymn of thanksgiving. “Now thank we all our God With heart and hands and voices, Who wondrous things hath done, In whom his world rejoices,

Who, from our mother's arms, Hath blessed us on our way With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."

What a difference that made in his life. Because he responded in praise to God for the coming of peace instead of grumbling and complaining, Rinkart experienced the joy of a thankful heart. The same is true for us. We don't get a choice over a great many things that happen to us. We have only the choice of how to respond. If we strive to give thanks for the good in the midst of the miserable instead of focusing on the problems, we have a joy that we would not otherwise experience.

Giving thanks helps keep life in perspective. It keeps us reminded of who we are and whose we are. It lessens the pain of a difficult yesterday. Responding in thanks also helps lift the burden of a present cloudy day. The joy that comes with a thankful heart provides the strength you need to get through a tough time.

There is an old nineteenth century gospel song by Johnson Oatman that speaks to that truth. "When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count your many blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done."

When you pause along the journey between birth and death to be thankful for what you have, it saves a great deal of trouble, stress, and grief. Assuming an attitude of gratitude for who you are and what you have, helps keep things in perspective and leads to the joy of a thankful heart. And for that, thanks be to God. Amen

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