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Inspecting Gratitude
Luke 17:11-19

Gratitude might seem like a harmless enough topic for a Sunday, but I confess I'm not particularly gracious about gratitude. Are you? I get really ticked off at people who don't show it when I think they should. I especially get ticked off in the car when someone pulls into traffic in front of me and doesn't do the little wave that I get to interpret as: "Thank you! You didn't have to let me in, but you did. I see you and I appreciate you."

If they don't, I get really mad, because there's nothing I can really do about it. I can't honk my horn, partly because I'm a pastor, and for all I know I might be honking at one of you or someone else who knows I'm a pastor and my honking would be a poor reflection on me, you, CMCL, all Mennonites, all Christians, and an insult to Jesus himself and then I'd be mortified forever and a terrible pastor and human being. Sigh. So, I just say, with all the hubris and sarcasm of a conflict-avoidant person who's safely in her car with the doors locked and windows up: "You're WEL-come." At least, that's what I say when there are little girls in the back seat.

All this to say, I am no expert on living gratitude.

I tend to think I'm pretty good at saying, "Thank you," myself. But then again, I'm guessing that all those drivers who don't wave when I want them to are probably not sitting there thinking, "Y'know, that lady just did me a favor, but I'm going to withhold any acknowledgement because I'm entitled to this spot in line, and I'd rather piss someone off than show gratitude." I'm guessing that more often than not, they're just not paying attention to me at all. So, I probably miss opportunities to express gratitude to others, too, because I'm too busy paying attention to myself at any given moment to notice that others around me might be doing something intentional to ease my way through life at that moment. I want to be an enlightened, benevolent soul who freely gives, with no strings attached, but I want to be acknowledged for it, too, darnit. Not so very gracious, eh?

And since we're starting off with some ranting, I'll confess that I not only get ticked off at lack of gratitude, I also get ticked off at too much gratitude, if it's the glib kind. Sometimes it feels like "gratitude" is how we excuse ourselves from having so very much more than we ought to have in comparison to so many. We call ourselves "blessed," as if we're surprised to find ourselves the beneficiaries of so much luxury when actually there's nothing random about it, but rather simply the inevitable workings of a system very much set up to keep the "blessings" with one group of people based on the blood and toil, current and historic, of so many groups and individuals.

I googled gratitude quotes this week, and it seems everyone who is or was anyone has had something sage to say about gratitude. One of the quotes that stood out to me, because I admire the author, Brené Brown, was this: "What separates privilege from entitlement is gratitude." I'll freely admit, I'm trusting the internet that these are actually her words. I think I agree with her, but I'm not sure I like the implications. In this transaction, gratitude saves you from the sin of entitlement, but makes no effort to speak to privilege. Because it's ok to have privilege as long as you're grateful for it? And I think we often use gratitude to smooth over realities that would otherwise be unsightly or uncomfortable in comparison.

Gratitude lists are generally lists of what we're grateful *for* not *to whom* we're grateful, because that could get really uncomfortable really quickly as a middle-class white, Christian in

the United States. It's just a hop, skip and a jump back to slavery, genocide and colonialism – that's where my good fortune comes from, and it's thanks to ... hmmm ... not feeling comfortable with where that sentence is ending. Giving thanks to God would mean God took from others for my good fortune. Giving thanks to those upon whose backs my white privilege was secured would bring up some really uncomfortable questions about reparations, would it not? Best to be generically grateful for all my "blessings" and just leave off the grateful to _____ part.

And so we come to our Gospel story for today ... and it's a fascinating look at gratitude. In this story, Jesus is approached by ten men with leprosy. In that time, leprosy made you an "unclean" person by society's standards, so people with leprosy were forced to live a separate existence and these ten were following those rules. They stayed a safe distance from Jesus, and called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" By this phrasing, it's quite possible that they were simply asking for alms, hoping to receive money or goods out of charity. Maybe they did this to all visitors. "Have mercy on us."

They didn't move to Jesus, nor he to them, he simply saw them and said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." "And as they did, they were healed," the text says. The significance of going to see the priests, is that it is priests who had the authority to verify that someone was "clean" or "unclean" and priests who had the power to restore them to the community from which all with leprosy were effectively cast out. Jesus healed them – but it was the priests who held the keys to the community's approval and acceptance.

Only one out of the ten people with leprosy sees that he's been healed before they reach the priests, and he responds by turning back to Jesus and thanking him and praising God. This time he doesn't keep his distance, but prostrates himself at Jesus' feet. And then the text says that this tenth man was a Samaritan. Jesus asks, "Wait, weren't there ten of you that were healed? Where's everyone else? They couldn't be bothered to come and say thanks?" (I'm inserting my own "You're WELcome!") The only one who turned back to say thank you was this foreigner, implying that the other nine were Jews, not Samaritans. "Well, you're free to go on your way. Your faith has saved you."

Up until their healing, these ten were a community "joined in suffering and misfortune," made equal by the common rejection of their disease. They called out to Jesus in one voice, "Have mercy!" Ironically, their *healing [would] divide them, for it means different things to them... The mercy they long for is not just the restoration of their flesh, but restoration of their lives. They long to go home. And the steps that will take them there include the pronouncement of the priest that they are clean. Their joy is unreal without that. But, joy will always elude them, for they only believe their healing when others believe it,* for there will always be the folks who say, "Aren't you the guy who had leprosy?" (1)

This is the significance of the tenth man's gratitude: not abdicating the assessment of his own wholeness to others.

Giving thanks is the beginning, because thanks is an act of accepting yourself as the be-gifted, the be-loved... Communities of shared loss: parents who have lost a child; recovering addicts; cancer survivors; [chronic illness] sufferers; refugees: like the ten lepers, share a single prayer. Those who belong to them are forever changed by these communities. The memory of misery, its taste, feel, sorrow and grief, are ever part of those who heal, part of the survivors who love them, too. In the community of misery, they [were] home, even if not healed. (2)

The nine would likely find this out, but not that day.

There was one among them who already knew that there would be no trumpets to herald his re-entry into community life: the Samaritan, the tenth man who turned back with gratitude. He would “never belong in Israel because of being foreign... He understood that his home was now with the man who understood his misery in grace, who heard his prayer. The unkindness of the world [could] not touch him, for he is not seeking a return to life before leprosy.” (3) He alone knows that the way ahead is new, unknown territory, not a return to former wholeness, but a new thing. And Jesus did not tell him, “Go back to your life,” or “go to the village,” or even, “Go return to your friends.” Jesus says, “Go on your way.” His way was gratitude. He didn’t just stop and praise God, he stopped in his tracks and turned back, returned to the place of his healing, and to the one who had healed him, the one who had responded to his plea for mercy.

The symbol on your bulletin cover today is an Adinkra symbol. (4) There is a whole lexicon of symbols, made by the Akan people of Ghana, in West Africa, these symbols stand for wisdom stories and proverbs, and you can see the symbols printed in signs, on fabric, all over the place in daily life. This name of this particular symbol is “Sankofa” and it means “go back and get it.” Sometimes it’s simply a bird looking back over its shoulder, sometimes, as here, the bird is reaching back to find an egg. This symbol has held profound meaning for people of the African diaspora—a symbol of wisdom, culture, ties to ancestry that were severed by the slave trade.

I kept thinking of this symbol this week, as I pondered this tenth man in today’s story who turned back, and whose turning back was credited to him as wisdom and faith. He found a great treasure in his turning back. His turning back doesn’t offend my sensitivities to modern gratitude. This man isn’t using gratitude to excuse himself from turning back; turning back to the source of his blessing is part and parcel of his gratitude. He was not only grateful *for* his healing, he was grateful *to* the one who restored him, and he turned back, and spoke that gratitude, and hugged the very feet of the one who healed him.

Zora Neale Hurston is credited as having said: “Those that ain’t got it can’t show it. Those that got it can’t hide it.” Gratitude is often thus in the New Testament – what the church has so rudely and ineffectively tried to copycat and called “evangelism” – going door to door, (or, more destructively, shore to shore), to tell others how to act and believe, is based on biblical accounts of folks so overflowingly grateful for their healing, or their salvation, or their restoration, or their place in a community that cared for one another and had all things in common, that they couldn’t help but share. Share their possessions, share their coat if they had two, forgive debts as theirs were forgiven. The gratitude and generosity in these stories of Jesus isn’t glib, and it isn’t generic, and the acts it inspires aren’t random acts of kindness, based on the whim and excess of the giver, but mercy given to those who ask! Food given to the hungry, company given to the imprisoned, the lonely shelter given to the homeless and exiled acceptance and family-love given to the outcast, justice to the oppressed, peace to the tormented. Jubilee and the re-distribution of wealth and inheritance.

Next time we say what we are grateful for, may we stop, turn back, and go to the source of our gratitude: say the words, touch the feet! Who knows what mercies might be given to us, what mercies perhaps have already been given. And perhaps the deep longings and knowings which inspire our glib gratitudes might finally be touched and healed if we are willing to turn back and find the benefactors of our “blessing” and not just speak our gratitude, but begin to restore right relationship. Jesus’ healings rarely restore someone to life as it was before. May our words of gratitude be part of connecting us to the Source of our Healing, and moving us on our way to the new thing awaiting us.

(1) (2) (3) Nancy Rockwell, “How Does the Creature Say Thanks?” *The Bite in the Apple*, October 5, 2013. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/how-does-the-creature-say-thanks/>

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https://www.google.com/search?q=sankofa+adinkra&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj12ov944XQAhUI4YMKHcXODkgQ_AUICCGB&biw=1332&bih=644#imgrc=ZMyIwE3EGpu6UM%3A

Although it is not quoted in this sermon, I am especially grateful for the insights of Keith F. Nickle in *Preaching the Gospel of Luke: Proclaiming God’s Royal Rule*. pp. 173-7.