

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 12, 2025 (Proper 23, Year C)
2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
Luke 17:11-19

There are three rhetorical questions I remember that were asked of me repeatedly throughout my childhood. The first was, "Were you born in a barn?" That usually came when I left a door open, or didn't clean up my room.

The second was, "Why are you reading all the time, when you could be outside playing?" because every free moment I had, I cracked open a book.

The third one was, "Have you forgotten something?" That was, of course, a parental correction, usually for not saying "thank you," after receiving some gift.

That last question is what I thought of when I read this lesson from Luke's gospel, the story of Jesus healing ten lepers. Only ONE comes back to give thanks. Ten were healed, but only the SAMARITAN came BACK. If my mother had been there, she would have said to the nine, "Have you forgotten something?"

We all understand the importance of gratitude, how it can radically change relationships. And we all CERTAINLY know as ADULTS that we APPRECIATE BEING thanked. Yet, when it comes to giving thanks to GOD, well, "Have we forgotten something?"

A few years ago, one of the Sunday school teachers at my church was teaching the story of the Rich Man and poor Lazarus. One of the children spoke up and said he was ALREADY RICH. She asked him what he meant, and he said, "I have a roof over my head, and I have a bed to sleep in. I'm ALREADY rich" That child was thankful.

But let me ask you: Is saying "thank you" just for KIDS?

We have in our readings today two stories about foreigners. Naaman is a Syrian general – not ONLY a foreigner, but even an ENEMY.

The leper that returns to JESUS is a SAMARITAN, and you KNOW how much the Jews hated THEM. A good Jew in that day would have no dealings at ALL with a Samaritan. They looked upon them as half-breeds, dogs.

And worse, he was a LEPER. Both Naaman and he were OUTSIDERS, TWICE over, and OUTSIDER is putting it KINDLY.

And yet, HAVING BEEN healed, having RECEIVED a blessing from God, Naaman and the Samaritan RETURNED to give praise and thanks.

In doing so, they LEAD us to ask an important question: Is it a FOREIGN CONCEPT to GIVE THANKS? Is it just for OUTCASTS and CHILDREN?

Jesus asked, "Weren't ten made clean? Where are the other nine?" That's a good question: where WERE they? Why did only ONE cleansed leper return to thank Jesus?

One pastor began his ministry at little First Presbyterian Church in Aberdeen, Mississippi. During his first year as pastor, he was visited by three men inquiring about one of his members, a widow who lived by herself. Was she getting out? Were her friends in Aberdeen keeping in touch? Was there anything they needed to know? The three men explained the situation, and gave him their business cards – one lived in New Jersey, another in Oklahoma, and the other in California. He was told to call them if there was ANYTHING they could HUMANLY do to make her life HAPPIER or EASIER.

These three men arrived each year bearing presents their wives had picked out in the shops of San Francisco and New York. The men had hired a family who mowed the woman's yard, trimmed the bushes, and checked on tree branches and gutters. One of the men prepared the woman's tax returns every year. Another contracted for repairs on her house, or made them himself. Sometimes

they helped her shop for a new car. They were METICULOUS in wanting to CHECK on everything, and anticipate every DIFFICULTY the woman might face. And every year, they visited the President of the Bank of Mississippi in Aberdeen, and explained AGAIN that they were to notify them of ANY WORLDLY NEED this woman might have.

The situation was this: Sixty years before, the three men had been soldiers standing on the ground floor of a house in Normandy, just a few days after D-Day, when a German grenade came bouncing down the stairs. A fourth soldier, the WOMAN'S HUSBAND, THREW himself on the grenade, absorbing most of the blast. The three men lived because of his sacrifice.

After the war was over, the three men began making their way to Aberdeen, Mississippi on a regular basis to make sure that this man's widow would LACK for NOTHING they had within their power to PROVIDE for her. They'd been DOING that for more than TWENTY-FIVE YEARS when this pastor first met them.

Isn't that a remarkable story? I'll tell you another remarkable fact: There were 18 soldiers on the first floor of that house in Normandy. SEVENTEEN of them were spared by the action of that one soldier's leaping on a grenade. But only 3 of the 17 traveled to Aberdeen, Mississippi.

That changes the story, doesn't it? We were thinking it was 100% gratitude, but it was only 17%. Three out of 17. Why ONLY 3? What does it TAKE for us to RECOGNIZE that life is a GIFT, and the only PURE RESPONSE is GRATITUDE?

Why did only ONE of the cleansed LEPERS return to thank JESUS? All ten were HEALED, but only ONE RECOGNIZED the healing for what it REALLY WAS.

Maybe, maybe the OTHERS thought that they DESERVED to be healed and didn't NEED to thank anyone. But ONE DID.

Or maybe they WERE grateful, but got caught up in the healing ITSELF and didn't THINK to thank Jesus. But ONE DID.

Or maybe those nine lepers WANTED to return and give thanks, but NOT before the OTHER things they had to do, not right AWAY, not YET. But ONE DID.

We're pretty hard on those UNGRATEFUL lepers, but THEIR reasons for not returning and giving thanks to God, WHATEVER they were, probably weren't much different than OURS.

What are OUR reasons? Every BREATH WE TAKE is a gift. Why don't WE give thanks to God more OFTEN? We have SO much to be GRATEFUL FOR, if only we would SEE it.

It says that one of the lepers "saw that he was healed." Surely, all 10 of them NOTICED. And surely the healing STUCK. Jesus didn't take it back. But only ONE of the lepers, not only SAW that he was healed, but SAW GOD'S HAND BEHIND it. He SAW that it was a gift of God's mercy and grace. And he PRAISED God, and he returned to Jesus and he THANKED him. He fell on his knees at Jesus' feet and worshipped him.

The others MAY have been grateful FOR something; this ONE was grateful TO SOMEBODY, to JESUS.

And Jesus PRAISES him. He says, "Your faith has made you well." Now, that means more than you might think. All TEN of the lepers were HEALED, so when Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well" to this ONE man kneeling at his feet, it's MORE than healing. THIS one was different. THIS one was made WHOLE.

The word we translate as, "has made you well," is the SAME word that means "saved." Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you." SEEING his healing for what it WAS, SEEING it as a GIFT from God, was an act of FAITH, and that FAITH SAVED him.

We hear a lot about billionaires these days. The very FIRST person to REACH the status of billionaire was a man whose NAME you know, but whose STORY you probably do NOT.

At the age of 23, he had become a millionaire, by the age of 50 a billionaire. Every decision, attitude, and relationship was tailored to create his personal power and wealth. But three years later, at the age of 53, he became ill.

His entire body was racked with pain, and he lost all the hair on his head. In complete agony, the world's only billionaire could BUY ANYTHING he WANTED, but he could only digest milk and

crackers. An associate wrote, "He could not sleep, would not smile, and nothing in life meant anything to him." His personal, highly skilled physicians predicted he would die within a year.

That year passed agonizingly slow. As he approached death, he awoke one morning with the vague remembrances of a dream. He could barely recall it, but knew it had something to do with not being able to take ANY of his successes WITH him into the next world. The man, who could CONTROL the BUSINESS world, suddenly realized he was NOT in control of his own LIFE. He was left with a choice.

He called his attorneys, accountants, and managers and announced that he wanted to channel his assets to hospitals, research, and mission work. On that day, John D. Rockefeller established his foundation. This new direction eventually led to the discovery of penicillin, cures for current strains of malaria, tuberculosis and diphtheria. The list of discoveries resulting from his choice is enormous.

But perhaps the most amazing part of Rockefeller's story is that the moment he began to give BACK a portion of all that he had earned, his body's CHEMISTRY was CHANGED. It was ALTERED SO SIGNIFICANTLY that he got BETTER. It looked as if he would die at 53, but he lived to be 98.

Rockefeller learned gratitude and to give back from his wealth. And that CHANGED him. Did it HEAL him? We don't KNOW that for certain, but we DO know that learning GRATITUDE made him WHOLE. It's one thing to be HEALED; it's something ELSE ENTIRELY to be made WHOLE.

The one leper who returned and threw himself at Jesus' feet in gratitude was not ONLY HEALED, he was SAVED by his THANKSGIVING. "Rise and go," Jesus said, "your faith has made you well."

ANYONE can come to Jesus, ANYONE can be BLESSED by God, and you ARE blessed in COUNTLESS ways, but that's only the BEGINNING of what Jesus WANTS to give you. He wants SO MUCH MORE for you.

He wants you know PEACE in your life, to know CONTENTMENT, to know PURPOSE, to know JOY, to know HIM. He wants you to be WHOLE.

ALL TEN of those lepers got what they PRAYED for, but this ONE received MORE than he'd ever DREAMED of. The difference was a grateful heart.

When you look at YOUR life, what do YOU see? Do you SEE what GOD has done for you? Do you see how BLESSED you are? (Do you see) What UNDESERVED GIFTS you have received? What are you GRATEFUL for? More importantly, WHO are you grateful TO? Amen.