Sunday School Commentary Lesson

By

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Grateful Faith, Luke 17:11-19

My theology professor in seminary, Dr. Molly Marshall used to say that the true mark of our spiritual maturity is directly related to how we give thanks. Are we a thankful people? If so, how do we express our thanksgiving to God, our families and friends...? Each day is a gift from God and we each have been blessed beyond measure. Are we willing to daily give thanks to God and others? Do we hoard our thanksgiving to ourselves? Do we post-pone giving thanks? Are we waiting for a better day in the future for life to be better? Are we willing to humble ourselves and generously give thanks?

In our text Jesus is confronted with ten lepers. But only one, a foreigner, returns to give thanks. No story in all the gospels so poignantly shows mankind's ingratitude. The lepers came to Jesus with desperate longing; he cured them; and nine never came back to give thanks. So often, once a person has got what he/she wants, he/she never comes back to say, "thank-you."

Commentary Lesson

Traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus would have been traveling from north to south. Strictly speaking, there was no "region between Samaria and Galilee." Since Galilee lay above Samaria, Jesus may have traveled near the border between the two regions as he made his way down to the Jordan to skirt around Samaria, as most Jewish travelers did. This geographical note, however vague it is, serves to establish Jesus' proximity to Samaria and hence a setting in which he might meet the Samaritan leper featured in the story.

The healing of lepers functioned in the Gospel as a sign of the power of God's Kingdom. Lepers lived a terrible life. They were excluded from family and friends. Lepers were not allowed at the temple to worship God. In fact, it was lawful for Jews to throw rocks at lepers if they got too close to people who were not affected by this terrible skin disease. A person with leprosy had to shout "unclean, unclean" when someone approached who wasn't sick. But, when Jesus approached, the lepers cried out to him in desperation.

William Barclay points out that - "In their common tragedy of their leprosy that had forgotten they were Jews and Samaritans and remembered only they were men in need. If flood surges over a piece of country and wild animals congregate for safety on small bit of higher ground, you will find standing peacefully together animals who are natural enemies and who at any other time would do their best to kill each other." Jewish and Samaritan lepers were healed. Jesus gave each of them the traditional instructions about showing themselves to the priests for the conformation they needed to enter their old way of life.

Now comes the twist in the story: the leper who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan v.16.
The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) exposes the social boundaries and relations between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus then asked a series of three questions that are not really addressed to the grateful Samaritan but underscore the point of the story. First, "Were not all ten made clean?" The question reminds us the ten were all healed, not just one. Second, Jesus asked about the other nine. Where are they? Have they missed their family, friends and old way of life so much there is no time to waste and return and give thanks to the Healing One? What does their failure to return to give thanks say them? Jesus' third question, "Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

This story challenges us to regard gratitude as an expression of faith. At the end, Jesus says, to the Samaritan, "Your faith has made you well." That faith was expressed not primarily in the lepers' collective cry for help but in the Samaritan's individual act of gratitude. Only his "loud voice" of praise matched the lepers' raised voices to call out for help at the beginning of the story.

In what, sense, then, is gratitude an expression of faith? Does not gratitude follow from faith? Or is gratitude itself an expression of faith? If gratitude reveals humility of spirit and a sensitivity to the grace of God in one's life, then is there any better measure of faith than wonder and thankfulness before what one perceives as undeserved expressions of love and kindness from God and from others? Are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay, and for which we often fail to be grateful? Here is a barometer of spiritual health: if gratitude is not synonymous with faith, neither response to God is separable from the other. Faith, like gratitude, is our response to the grace of God as we have experienced it. For those who have become aware of God's grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and respond in the spirit of the grateful leper.

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