

Is This Story About Me?

Text: Luke 17: 11-19

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

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Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard steps with me to the Thanksgiving pulpit today. Or, at least something he said guides my thoughts for you. His words: "When you read a gospel story, you must constantly be saying to yourself, 'It is talking to me, and about me.'"

I find that to be so true. And though I don't want us to step onto the slippery slope of too much narcissism together (that is, thinking everything is all about us), I do want us to give his thought a fair hearing. I want us to listen to a story from the gospel of Saint Luke, one that bears a perfect fit for this week of Thanksgiving; and I want to see if we might find ourselves saying, just so, "It is talking to me, and about me."

So that we hear it fresh together, and with a slightly different sound, I am going to ask Nanette to read for us from Eugene Peterson's pastoral translation called the Message. Listen with the ears of your heart.

It happened that as he made his way toward Jerusalem, he crossed over the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men, all lepers, met him. They kept their distance but raised their voices, calling out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Taking a good look at them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." One of them, when he realized that he was healed, turned around and came back, shouting his gratitude, glorifying God. He kneeled at Jesus' feet, so grateful. He couldn't thank him enough - and he was a Samaritan. Jesus said, "Were not ten healed? Where are the nine? Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?" Then he said to him, "Get up. On your way. Your faith has healed and saved you."

So, try it out with me. Let's give it a run. "When you read a gospel story, you must constantly be saying to yourself, 'It is talking to me, and about me.'"

At first pass, it's a story about a grateful soul. And you and I know how amazing the power of giving thanks can be! We know how refreshingly wonderful it is when someone pops up with a burst of authentic gratitude! We know how life-giving it is to be thankful ourselves and how sweet it is when others are that way with us. Truth is, there are very few things in this world more powerful than a truly grateful heart!

Even more. The story tells us that this single thankful soul "couldn't thank Jesus enough!" He was simply ebullient, bursting with thanks and praise! And, leave it to the Bible, wouldn't you know it, he was the absolute least likely of the ten to be portrayed in this light. No one would have ever bet on his gracious debut. He was the foreigner after all, an outsider, a chap of the less-than-equal variety, a leper from the despised land of Samaria.

If I were an artist I would paint his portrait splashed in the colors of life! One minute burdened by the anguish of leprosy, and, a breath later, set free by the healing power of Jesus. Greens and yellows and blues and reds! And movement, too, kinesthetic energy set loose; movement that portrays lift and lilt and life and loveliness; transforming movement that involves turning and glorifying and giving a shout-out to God!

Last Monday, I took a quiz on the internet. It asked "How grateful are you?" and then posed a dozen multiple-choice questions. The scoring was in three categories. *Highly grateful* was the best. The annotation said: You are in the top third. You are going through life blessing everyone and everything with gratitude. Keep up the good work! The next category was called *appreciative*. This time the annotation said: You're right smack in the middle - thankfully average with room for improvement. Last and least was the category called *ungrateful*. It said: you're in the bottom tenth of respondents. Gratitude is not your strong suit. You might want to make some adjustments! The quiz offered this query at the end. Did we get you right? Click here to take the test again and try to improve your score!ⁱⁱ

Well, the single soul in the story of Jesus needed no improvement! He exuded pure and precious thanks. He needed no retake, no reminder, no do-over. But how about you? How about me? Where are we on the spectrum? Is the story anywhere near about us?

But then the story gets more disturbing. Its literary style employs the device of comparison. It's not just about one grateful soul, but also, by contrast, those whose response was so very different. Ten were healed and only one returned with thanks.

What piques my curiosity even more is the vivid imbalance in the story ó one in ten! The contrast is so stark! I wonder if this is reflective of what Jesus observed in life around him ó that only one person in ten bore the blessing of a grateful heart? Yikes! Could it be that the nine who went their own way were really very grateful and lived secretly thankfully the rest of their days? Did they become advocates and champions of the Good News because they had been healed? Did they come back the next day and find Jesus for a more personal, less public, show of gratitude? We just don't know.

Also interesting to me! in all of the accounts we have of Jesus, over four Gospels he asked three hundred and seven different questions. Most often he asked them on single and separate occasions, but three of them are posed in this account. "*Were not ten healed? Where are the nine? Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?*"

A pastor by the name of Hugh Stevenson Tigner once preached on this very wondering. He called for a re-awakening of our awareness of our blessings and an intentional cultivation of learning to express our gratitude. He noted that the more blessed we are, the more for which we might be grateful, the more we seem to take for granted. We even get to a place of entitlement - of thinking whatever comes our way is through some superior capacity or favor that we possess. These are among his words: "It seems that we have come to accept the gifts of life and grace . . . even the bountiful harvest of

creation . . . somewhat as a rabbit accepts lettuce. It does not ever occur to the rabbit that somebody plowed the garden, bought the seed, planted it, fertilized it, cultivated it, and that without these multiple contributions, there wouldn't be any lettuce!ⁱⁱⁱ

Pastor Tigner concludes: "We are all colossally indebted beings! We are recipients of a benevolence operating through the process of nature and history! We did not make ourselves! We did not make the universe that supports our life and provides us with opportunity or joy or hope! At the very least, gratitude seems to be a reasonable response to such facts!"

Back to the beginning and the wisdom for our wondering. "When you read God's word, you must constantly be saying to yourself, 'it is talking to me, and about me.'"

May our ears be open to the hearing and our hearts to the living. In the name and spirit of the One who was and is and ever will be the deep heart of grace and gratitude for all of earth's peoples. Amen.

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ⁱ Eugene H. Peterson. The Message. NavPress, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Michael McCullough and Robert Emmons. "How Grateful Are You?" © 2000 on Beliefnet, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Story as told by Chandler W. Gilbert. "On Being Awakened to Gratitude" an unpublished sermon preached at Trinitarian Congregational Church in Concord, MA on November 19, 1979.

First Church of Christ Congregational
United Church of Christ
12 South Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
860.233.9605 www.whfirstchurch.org