

November 13 & 14, 2004

Luke 17:11-19

Are You “One in Ten” Blessed?

Today I am starting a little mini-series of two messages that will lead us up to the Thanksgiving celebration. Appropriately, the mini-series is about Thanksgiving. We are so blessed as a people and a nation that at times it almost seems impossible for us to understand true thanksgiving. Many of us think we know hardship and most of us are familiar with the traditional story of Thanksgiving where William Bradford, of Plymouth Settlement, proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving to celebrate the survival of the Pilgrims in their second year in the New World, as well as an abundant harvest that they had reaped with the aid of the Indians. However, most people don't know that the first American Thanksgiving didn't occur in 1621 with this group of Pilgrims who shared a feast with a group of friendly Indians. The first recorded thanksgiving actually took place in Virginia more than 11 years earlier, and it wasn't a feast. The winter of 1610 at Jamestown had reduced a group of 409 settlers to 60. That is a survival rate of one out of seven. For every person who survived, six died in the winter of 1610. The survivors prayed for help, without knowing when or how it might come. When help arrived, in the form of a ship filled with food and supplies from England, a prayer meeting was held to give thanks to God. You would think that after seeing so many of their loved ones die due to the hardships of the New World, they would not feel that thankful. However, the opposite was true. They realized they had much to be thankful for.

We ourselves often don't realize how blessed we are, or how thankful we ought to be, until what we have is threatened to be taken away. It is good and fitting that as Christians,

we ought to celebrate Thanksgiving for God has certainly been good to every single one of us. Someone once said that gratitude is the source for all other Christian virtues. If that is the case, then perhaps we can reason that ingratitude may well be the source of all, or at least many of our faults as well. When we begin to take for granted what God has done for us, then we become calloused and filled with pride and then God can no longer use us. For a Christian, every day ought to be a day of thanksgiving.

Rudyard Kipling was a great writer and poet whose writings we have all enjoyed. Unlike many old writers, Kipling was one of the few who had opportunity to enjoy his success while he lived. He also made a great deal of money at his trade. One time a newspaper reporter came up to him and said, "Mr. Kipling, I just read that somebody calculated that the money you make from your writings amounts to over a hundred dollars a word; Mr. Kipling raised his eyebrows and said, "Really, I certainly wasn't aware of that." The reporter cynically reached down into his pocket and pulled out a one hundred dollar bill and gave it to Kipling and said, "Here's a hundred dollar bill, Mr. Kipling. Now, you give me one of your hundred dollar words." Mr. Kipling looked at that hundred dollar bill for a moment, took it and folded it up and put it in his pocket and said, "Thanks."

He's right! The word thanks is certainly a hundred dollar word. In fact, I would say it is more like a million dollar word. It's one word that is too seldom heard and too rarely spoken and too often forgotten. If we would all adopt an attitude of thanksgiving into our lives - our lives would be changed. We would savor each day. It is probably impossible to tell the actual percentage of persons who are truly grateful but the actual numbers are probably pretty close to the percentage of those who gave thanks in one story of gratitude

that Jesus was directly involved with. The story is found in Luke chapter seventeen and it is a story about ten lepers who are healed and one comes back and thanks Jesus for his healing. Perhaps true thanksgiving is a one in ten proposition.

¹¹Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him--and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

In biblical times, leprosy was a terrible problem. The word was often used to describe a variety of skin diseases, but doctors believe most of the people suffered with what we now call Hansen's Disease. It starts with a white patch of skin that becomes numb, so much so that the victims cannot even feel a needle piercing the spot. The patch begins to spread all over the body and often manifests itself on the face, so the disease is impossible to hide. It then begins to form spongy tumors on the face and, at the same time, attacks the internal organs as well. The nerve endings become numb so the victim cannot tell when something is hurting him, like fire burning his hand. The leprosy itself was not fatal, but more lepers died from other diseases they contracted because of their weakened condition. Lepers were called "the walking dead," and were kicked out of their homes and villages and forced to

live in colonies with other lepers. The disease of leprosy was a painful disease but the physical pain was not the most terrible part of the disorder. Lepers were separated. They were shut out and cast off. It seems here that these lepers were shut out to an area away from everyone else. They were shut out from their Family. No one knows how long it had been since they had felt the touch of their wife or the kiss of their children. They were shut out from their Friends. Friends no longer came over or invited them to go somewhere with them. They were shut out from Fellowship of the church. They couldn't work or worship at the temple.

A few years ago, the Peanuts cartoon pictured Charlie Brown bringing out Snoopy's dinner on Thanksgiving Day. But it was just his usual dog food in a bowl. Snoopy took one look at the dog food and said, "This isn't fair. The rest of the world is eating turkey with all the trimmings, and all I get is dog food. Because I'm a dog, all I get is dog food." He stood there and stared at his dog food for a moment, and said, "I guess it could be worse. I could be a turkey."

There was very little joy in Snoopy's thankfulness, for his thankfulness was based on a comparison. His thankfulness was based on the fact that he was better off than the turkey. Therein lies a small lesson in that when we're down in the dumps and full of complaints because life isn't fair, we should recognize that there are so many others far worse off than we are. We should stop complaining, but when it comes to our thankfulness, the basis should never be, "Whew, am I thankful that I'm not her," or "I am so thankful I don't have to live like that."

Thankfulness is so much more than a comparison of our own situation to someone else's. Thankfulness is so much more than having enough food to eat, a nice, warm home to live in, good health, or financial security, because each of those circumstances can be taken from us in an instant. Thankfulness is a state of being and a way of life, and we usually fail to live in a state of thankfulness because we take it for granted. We're like the world traveler who has been everywhere and seen everything and takes for granted the blessing and beauty of all that he has seen. We have become so accustomed to our blessings that they fail to excite us and generate thankfulness, for we take them for granted. Emerson said that if the stars came out only once a year, everybody would stay up all night to behold them. We have seen the stars so often that we don't bother to look at them anymore. In like manner, we have grown accustomed to our blessings, and quite frankly, we've become spoiled.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Luke shares with us the account of one leper who was not spoiled. There have been many guesses as to why the other nine didn't return to thank Jesus, but our focus is not on the nine, but on the one who was thankful, for he provides us with some very important lessons on thankfulness.

First of all, being thankful is not only expressed through prayer and public proclamation, but through your attitude in living life. I doubt this leper had a great deal of joy in having leprosy. As I have already stated, Lepers were shunned by society. They had to live outside the city. They had to shout "Unclean" whenever they came close to others, so they could be warned to stay away. The first century belief was God gave leprosy to punish those who were sinful and disobedient. If this was your station in your

life, being looked down upon by society, being told that you have leprosy because you've found disfavor with God, I wonder how much joy and thankfulness would exist in your life? Somehow this leper, maintained a spirit of joy and thankfulness, which enabled him to more fully appreciate what Christ had done for him. We have all experienced a kind of "leprosy;" a time where we felt separated and alone, whether it was in the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the dissolution of a marriage, or the infliction of severe emotional pain. We've all had circumstances in life where we've lived outside the city, where we've paused and asked, "God, what did I do to deserve this?" My understanding theology and my relationship with God tells me that the leper didn't deserve it, and the same can be said for each of our own bouts with "leprosy." But do we share something else in common with the leper; do we also share his thankful attitude?

Does your life, represent a spirit of thankfulness? I can think of people and I'm sure that you each know people who have an expression, an attitude, an aura that exudes happiness and thankfulness for life. Are you one of those people who exude thankfulness or are you more like Snoopy, whose thankfulness is based on comparison? Being thankful is so much more than a comparison of circumstances. Being thankful is so much more than a private prayer or public proclamation. Being thankful is expressed through your attitude in living life.

The leper also teaches us that thankfulness completes healing. Healing means to be made whole, and while all ten of the lepers found physical healing, only one found wholeness. Now, I'm not suggesting that we thank God for crises or pain, but what I am suggesting is that we thank God for his continued faithfulness and presence in the midst of

crises. I am suggesting that we thank God for the strength and growth that we experience during crises. I am suggesting that we thank God for the shower of mercy that soaks us during crises. Crisis situations don't always turn out the way we want them to, and the pain that we experience, be it physical or emotional, is very real, but we can still find healing, and we can still find wholeness by maintaining a spirit of thankfulness. Thankfulness is an attitude. Thankfulness is a way of life. Thankfulness enables healing to bring wholeness.

But the story of the one thankful leper teaches us a far more important lesson about what Jesus seeks from those whom he comes in contact with. Jesus wants to do immensely more for us than cure our physical ills. He wants to give us a relationship with him that will not only last forever but will give us much more than "normal" life. Apparently nine out of ten people are willing to settle for "normal." They are interested only in this life, its comforts and its pleasures. It would not occur to them to pray for anything other than the tangible and visible realities, the only ones they know. What they got, physical cure, was miraculous and it was good. However, it is not really good enough. Jesus wants to give us a relationship that goes beyond "skin deep." God wants a healing that encompasses the heart, the soul, the intellect and the will. God wants to give us a spirit and a demeanor that is abnormal, that is beyond normal. That's what I want, I want a spirit and a life that is beyond normal.

Physical health alone is good, but mere physical health is good enough to bring happiness in its wake. It is not enough to say thanks; one must give it, indeed, live it. We deprive ourselves about 90% of the time of fully enjoying God's grace by neglecting to be grateful. Jesus cured the ten lepers long ago, but the story has been preserved as a

metaphor for any “skin” disorders we might have, ranging from being too thick-skinned to being too thin-skinned, too dense or too touchy. We might have inherited these disorders from our family heritage or we might have acquired them through a life of dysfunctional reactions to situations that scared us or hurt us. However, we have arrived at them, we all have a measure of “skin” disorder in our personality make-up. Only Jesus can cure these and only if we ask him and then trust his power to do so. That means following his prescription and taking our “medicine,” as required. Like any medicine, it must be taken in doses, over a period of time, and our behavior has to change. The “medicine” Jesus prescribes is really a large and steady dose of gratitude for life as a gift.

I think that it is highly significant that the Bible identifies the one thankful leper as being a Samaritan. This would hit a Jew like a ton of bricks. Of all people, this one out of ten cured, the only one to show some class, was a hated Samaritan. A Jew would not miss the point. In verse seventeen, where are the other nine? These Jews who should have known better, failed to apply the same energy in giving thanks as they did in begging for a favor. The “other nine”, as Jesus called them are most like modern persons who beg a favor but never recognize a blessing given or whom never give credit to whom credit is due. It is much like the story I heard about a woman who was rushing home from a doctor’s appointment. The doctor had been somewhat delayed at the hospital, and the lab work took a little longer than usual so by the time she left the clinic she was running quite a bit behind schedule. She still had to pick up her prescription, pick up the children from the baby-sitter, and get home and make supper, all in time to make it to the prayer meeting at her church that evening. As she began to circle the busy Wal-Mart parking lot, looking

for a space, the windows of heaven were opened, as it says in Genesis, and a downpour began. While she wasn't usually the type to bother God with small problems, she began to pray as she turned down the row closest to the front door. "Lord, you know what kind of a day I've had, and there's still an awful lot to do. Could you please grant me a parking space right away, oh, and close to the building so I don't get soaked." The words weren't even completely out of her mouth when she saw the backup lights of a car come on at the end of the row. It was the best space in the whole parking lot, right next to the handicap spots and straight out from the front door. She made straight for it and as she pulled in, she said, "never mind God, something just opened up." That is simply a flawed human perspective –we often fail to see the hand of God in an event and then when we don't see the hand of God we are not thankful. Perhaps the "other nine" had a different perspective ;

- Maybe one of the lepers wanted to wait to see if the cure was real.
- Maybe a second wanted to wait to see if it would last.
- Maybe a third one said "I will go see Jesus later – after I visit my family."
- Maybe a fourth decided that he had never had leprosy in the first place.
- Maybe the fifth reasoned - "I must have had a temporary form of leprosy I would have gotten well anyway."
- Perhaps the sixth - gave the glory to the priests.
- Maybe the seventh said, "Jesus didn't really do anything. All He did was tell me to go..."
- Maybe the eighth said - "Any rabbi could have done that."
- Maybe the ninth leper said, - "I was itching a lot less lately. I think I was already getting better anyway."

We can presume a lot of things – but the greatest cause to separate this Samaritan from the 9 other Lepers was his Uncommon Thankfulness!

What has Jesus ever done for you? –As if offering forgiveness of our sins isn't enough!
-If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of this world. -If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy. -If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more blessed than the million who will not survive this week. -If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation, you are ahead of 500 million people in the world. -If you can attend church meetings without fear of harassment, arrest, torture, or death, you are more blessed than three billion in the world. If your parents are still alive and still married, you are very rare, even in the United States. If anyone has a reason to be Uncommonly Thankful – It is us!