

October 13, 2019

Returning to Give Thanks

OT: Jeremiah 31:27-34

NT: Luke 17:11-19

Leprosy was the Ebola virus of Jesus' day. Lepers were shunned and segregated out of fear. They were required to yell out a warning to those who approached. Spontaneous remission was rare. Ten people were healed by Jesus of this horrible disease, one stopped and returned to give thanks. Thankfulness is a way of life, not simply something we do on the fourth Thursday of November. It should infuse our worship, daily prayers, and our actions. The number one way we are to interact with God is thanking him for all he has done. Saying thank you is not enough, we must live thankfulness.

The meaning of this simple story does not have to be any more profound than it at first appears. The main point extolls the virtue of gratitude. A secondary point is scored through the reminder that such virtues deserve to be recognized wherever they appear, even if those who exhibit them are not those who would expect to do so.

Jesus heals ten lepers but only one of them returns to give thanks. This is clearly the proper response. The theme is a favorite one of Luke's, tied to his interest in worship. Notably neither Matthew nor Mark record a single story in which any person who is healed or blessed by Jesus praises God or gives thanks for what has happened. Sometimes, the *onlookers* glorify God, but never the one who actually benefited. Luke describes this as happening a number of times and in this story calls special attention to the importance of such thanksgiving. To say that we ought to thank Jesus and praise God for the goodness we receive is not controversial -- no one's going to argue that we *shouldn't*. But so many (nine out of ten?) don't do so out of sheer neglect.

The fact that the healing is not instantaneous really drives this point home. If Jesus had said, "Be clean!" and the leprosy had vanished, perhaps all ten would have been more inclined to thank him. But that's not how it worked this time. They went their way, and over a period of time (hours? days?), their skin cleared up. The connection with Jesus' words may then have seemed less direct.

Some distance may have been covered, requiring now a return journey to thank him. The offering of thanks has become mildly inconvenient; it interferes with the direction and flow of current pursuits- "He turned back".

Luke waits to reveal the identity of the exemplary leper -- "and he was a Samaritan" . So, he traps the reader into approving of the virtuous person before revealing that he was a person the reader would not normally favor. Specifically, he was a religious heretic.

What's the point? Luke is very generous with regard to humanity. It is only in this Gospel that we encounter Pharisees who, though they oppose Jesus, do the right thing by warning him of danger. In Acts, we meet noble Roman soldiers who, though they oppose Christianity, insist that Christians be treated with justice. We even meet pagan natives on the island of Malta who show "unusual kindness" to shipwrecked sailors. These writings try to break down the "us and them" mentality that separates Christians from all others in the world. Such distinctions may be valid or even necessary in certain contexts, but all people were made in God's image and even those who do not know or acknowledge this

may be "good people." Virtue is virtue, Luke seems to think. Give credit where it's due.

The leading scientific expert on gratitude, Dr. Robert A. Emmons, defines gratitude as having two parts: "(1) affirming goodness in one's life and (2) recognizing that the sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self."

At this most basic, gratitude is something nearly everyone experiences (particularly in the first stage), and this experience can be practically involuntary. That is, most people will recognize and feel warmed by good things that happen in their lives even without intentionally trying to do so.

Basic gratitude is more automatic and "feel-good" than the basic states of all the other practices. Even when your not studying or trying to get some alone time for spiritual purposes, or are only fasting for health reasons, these exercises still take a good deal of effort to initiate and often remain difficult and uncomfortable throughout . On the other hand, everyone experiences tinges of gratitude without thinking about it, and enjoys the uplift it lends the heart.

Yet, when elevated and practiced as a spiritual discipline, gratitude can in fact be just as strenuous and demanding as others.

While basic gratitude is passively evoked by external events, of the exclusively positive variety, the spiritual discipline of gratitude is intentionally chosen, deliberately trained, and exercised in all circumstances. It is not waited for, but pursued.

While basic gratitude is a set of fleeting and fluctuating feelings, the spiritual discipline of gratitude is an action. It is not just experienced, but expressed. The spiritual discipline of gratitude is practiced not just because it feels good, but because it's the right thing to do---not just for one's own good, but for the good of one's family, community, and society. The discipline of gratitude is in fact not a feeling at all, but a moral virtue.

The spiritual discipline of gratitude leaves behind the realm of simply emotion and instead becomes an attitude, a stance, a way. One that necessitates great effort to develop and maintain—the offering of a sacrifice of thanksgiving on the altar of life.

By making thanksgiving a way of life, in worship, in action, and in perception we fulfill the reason we were created. “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His steadfast love endures forever.”

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