

Grateful and Gripping
II Corinthians 9:6-15
Luke 17:11-19

“Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except the foreigner?’”

The Bible never says where the nine are. It merely asks the question. All we know for sure is that one returned, a Samaritan, to give thanks to the One who healed him. Perhaps the whereabouts of the nine are not for us to know, are unimportant to the story. The point, after all, is that the foreigner, the “otherly-born” returned, and in his return we behold the coincidence of grace and gratitude that leaves us bowed down before the God who is the giver of both.

But the question still haunts me because I suspect that wherever the nine have gone, you and I are in that number more often than not. Like the lepers, we stand at a distance from God and cry out for help. Then when help comes, or as John Baillie so simply and truthfully put it, “if the imagined danger disappears as it usually has done, I incline only to think how absurd were my fears and to banish the whole little episode from my mind with a shrug of relief. How often I forget,” he confesses, “to follow up my petition with thanksgiving! Nine times out of ten do I forget, thus justifying Christ’s question, ‘Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?’”

We do not know about the nine, but we surely know about ourselves. We know that nine times out of ten it does not occur to us to be grateful, to return thanks, to praise God for the wonder of our lives. We wake, we work, we refresh ourselves with food and friends and family and then fall to sleep with no word of thanks. Nine times out of ten the gift of life, of health, of friendship, of work, of play, of food, of family, of shelter, of worship is experienced not a gift but a given. We not only accept the gift but come to expect it, gripe when it is not ours for the taking. And so it is that our daily existence justifies Christ’s question.

That said, our lives are not without moments of thanksgiving. There are, first of all, those unsettling reminders that evoke a kind of gratitude: a visit to a friend in the hospital, who may never regain strength, prompts us to remember, with all our aches and pains, that we do still have enough health for independence; a talk with someone, whose personal life is in pieces and whose spirit is broken, reminds us that the chaos of our lives is more ordered than we realize; the daily headlines--of devastation and death in Haiti, of carnage in Syria—cause us to count our blessings while we keep our distance. As John Updike’s character Rabbit Angstrom says, “When you think of the dead, you got to be grateful.” There is a sort of gratitude *via negativa* that still leaves Christ with the question, “Were not ten made clean? Where are the nine?”

Or there is the thanks that we return not to Christ but to ourselves. We consider the work of our hands, our patient dealing with our children, health assured by clean living, a future secured in the bank and, for all these blessings, we seem to have only ourselves to thank. When I think of how our society lauds the illusion of the self-made man and how oblivious we are to the systems that privilege race and class, I begin to understand why, nine times out of ten, we forget to give thanks! In our self-referential gratitude, we also justify Christ’s question, “Were not ten made clean? Where are the nine?”

Then there are those who are grateful but have clue whom to thank. Sir Leslie Stephen, at the death of his first wife in 1871, writes in a letter, “I thank--something--that I loved her as heartily as I knew how to love, that I would have died for her with pleasure and that I scarcely even saw a cloud in her bright face.” I thank--something. Or I think of Katherine Mansfield who exclaimed in the presence of the Alps, “If only one could make some small grasshopper sound of. . .*thanks* to some one--but to who?” We may be speechless before the gift of it all--the gift of someone to love, the gift of the earth and its fullness, the gift of something as elusive as purpose or something as mundane as the first cup of coffee in the morning, but if we do not know the One to thank, even our genuine response of gratitude leaves Jesus looking down the road and asking, “Where are the nine?”

The gratitude that comes to us by way of contrast or as self-congratulations or as an emotion with no object may find us momentarily happy but not whole. Hence the story in Luke’s Gospel. Nine times out of ten, we live justifying Christ’s question. But what of that tenth time? What prompted Jesus to say to the tenth man, “Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well”—has made you whole?

Initially all ten set out down the road as sick men who had nothing to lose. Their faces disfigured, their fingers fallen off, their feet bound with bandages. Society declared them to be untouchable “others.” A miracle cure was their only hope. So like the nine, the tenth man initially obeyed Jesus when he said “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” The ten believed in the power of Jesus’ mercy just enough to take the first step, to do

what he told them to do, to put themselves, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “in the situation where faith becomes possible.”

As they went, Luke tells us, they were made clean. “OMG” we would text today. “Leprosy gone. On way to priest. CU soon!” Maybe they stepped up their pace, eager to get back to life as it was before leprosy. Miraculously their bodies had been healed. But as Jesus said in another story about his healing of a paralytic, “That was the easy part.” Having a healthy body is one thing; being made whole is quite another. According to this parable, being wholly human has something to do with living in grateful response to the God who has given us all things.

One of the ten, when he sees that he is healed, literally turns clean around in his tracks. Praising God with a loud voice, he falls at Jesus’ feet and thanks him. With this parable in mind, essayist Margaret Visser observes that gratitude “includes accepting—not resenting—dependence on something provided by someone who is not ourselves.” Whether we acknowledge it or not, you and I live, day by day, dependent on the God who has given us life and breath. “Because it is painful to think of the absolute dependence in which I have been established,” H. Richard Niebuhr wrote, “...my usual reaction to that act is to try to forget it; to be unresponsive to it...to accept the familiar pattern of self-ignoring existence....” What made the tenth man whole, what decisively changed his life going forward, no matter the difficulties that might still confront him, was his relationship with the One who had upheld and sustained and directed his life since birth.

I think of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman from Holland, who prayed as she awaited transport to Auschwitz: “You have made me so rich, oh God... My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You...one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in You, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer....” This is the relationship for which we were made, the relationship that made the tenth man well, the love in whose hold we become wholly ourselves.

Curiously, only after the tenth man returns and falls at Jesus’ feet and thanks him does Luke reveal that the man was a Samaritan—a person who was doubly “othered” by society. I found myself wondering if he now would also be “othered” by his own community because he had been healed by a Jewish rabbi, if his isolation would simply take a new form. When Jesus said to him, “Get up and go on your way,” I wondered what his way would be on the boundary world where his faith had made him whole. According to some, Luke was wondering the same thing; was thinking about the boundary that was being crossed as the gospel began to be proclaimed to the Gentiles, was thinking about the church when he thought about where in the world the tenth man would go.

My own wondering started me thinking about this church as a community of the grateful in a society of the self-made, a gathering of the healed and the hurting who return Sunday after Sunday to praise God in a loud voice, falling at Jesus’ feet to thank him and declare our dependence on him, no matter the conditions or circumstance of the week just past. Here we are known and forgiven, found when we are lost and raised up when the world has brought us low, reminded by word and sacrament who we are and to whom we belong. “It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christians is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed.” The words are Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s. “Therefore, let them who until now have had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of their hearts. Let them thank God on their knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace....”

How do people go on their way without the gift of community in their lives and the gratitude that attends it? I do not know. Perhaps they are the nine: healed by God of their diseases but too far down the road rejoicing to seek the face of Him who first loved them. Perhaps it is the one returning--all the ones returning--week after week, year after year, decade after decade, who have been called into the fellowship of the grateful and who dare to call themselves the church of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you are by God's grace the one in ten gathered in this place, the one to whom our Lord has said, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you whole." Thanks be to God! Amen.