

## How Do You Respond to Blessings? ©

Luke 17:11-19

October 9, 2016

Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

This story from Luke about the 10 lepers who were healed by Jesus is intriguing, isn't it? I wonder why Luke wants us to know that the one who came back to give thanks, was a foreigner? It seems to imply that the other 9 were not foreigners. Otherwise, Luke would have surely said that they were all Samaritans, or just not said anything at all. So, there must be some significance in the fact that this man was a Samaritan.

Another question is the obvious. Why would the others not come back to give thanks? Once a person had leprosy, they were banished from the community – never to have physical contact with their family again, never to get close to them. They could only talk with them from a distance. They were considered unclean. They watched as fingers and toes and noses began to rot away. And the hope of being cured was almost nonexistent. Why would these people, healed of such a horrible disease, not come back to give thanks?

It was the normal procedure after a person was cured, to go to the priests to be examined and declared clean again, so that that person could rejoin the community. That is what Jesus told these men to do. We've read of Jesus touching a blind man's eyes with mud and spit and making him able to see again. We've heard of him touching a person, or commanding them to get up and walk. And they did.

In this case, as the lepers approached, begging for mercy, Jesus just told them to “go – show yourselves to the priest,” and as they went, they were healed. He did not touch them. He did not lay his hands on them at all. It sounds as though they were healed on the way as they walked, or perhaps, ran to the priest.

The region where this happened was between Samaria and Galilee. The Samaritans and Jews, as we've said before, were enemies from way back. The Jews looked at the Samaritans as a mixed, impure race. The Samaritans believed that they had the true holy place of worship – which was not the Jewish temple, but an historic place in their region. But with leprosy, social barriers changed. Once banished to a leper colony, they were all together. At that point, their community was a mixture of Samaritans and Jews, or whoever had to be there. The *new* barrier was now between those who had leprosy and the rest of the world.

So ... were the nine so anxious to separate themselves again, from the foreigner, that they just kept running ... running toward the temple, to the priest who would declare them clean and well, running toward their wives and children, their homes, their lives reclaimed? And who could blame them? Those nine did nothing wrong. They did exactly what Jesus told them to do. Yet, here was one person who took the time to come back and to give a heart-felt thanks; one person who praised God; one person who was a foreigner.

While serving the church in Kansas, we had the opportunity to meet John and Gwen Haspels, who served in Ethiopia. I've told you about them before. The Haspels are Presbyterian missionaries whom the Parsons Sunday School offering supported. They told us about a woman who had epilepsy and because of seizures, she had fallen in the fire in her home, more than once, and was badly burned. The Suri people there, in Ethiopia, believe that a person with epilepsy has an evil spirit. This woman was considered unclean and an outcast because of her epilepsy. The other women would not associate with her, or let her sit near them. But, because of the message that the Haspels kept telling the people – the Good News message of God's love for this woman and for all of them, the message of God's grace and mercy, and how it is shown in the life and death of Jesus, God's Son, the woman was finally accepted and became a part of the community again. Once again, God caused reconciliation and wholeness through the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

Another question that arises in this passage is this: If Jesus told all ten of the lepers to go to the priest because they were healed, then why did he say to the one who came back, "get up, your faith has made you well?" Were not all of them already healed? Was this man not already healed of leprosy, even before he came back to express his thanks? Could it be that he received more than a physical healing?

The woman in Ethiopia who had recovered from her burns and was learning to live with her disfigurement, received a deeper healing – another blessing – a wholeness – as she learned how much God loved her and accepted her, and that she was accepted by others.

Could it be that the greater healing for this man – even greater than being healed from leprosy – was the blessing he received of salvation and reconciliation with God as he came to Jesus and gave his genuine thanks and praise?

So, what are you thankful for? If you were asked to testify to what the Lord has done for you in your life, what would you say? And just what is this feeling of true thankfulness? How is it expressed? How do you respond to the blessings in your life?

I've asked this question before – in other places in ministry. Here are a couple of answers I've gotten. One person said: "Like the hymn says: 'While smiling, God has called me by name ... God really knows me, truly loves me! God speaks to us from his heart ... it's not logical ... the Word became flesh isn't logical ... it's from the very heart of God! And the best response I can give comes from my heart too. That is where the feeling of thanksgiving starts.'"

Another said: "I'm thankful that God is the Living Water that has quenched my thirst for God's presence. I'm thankful that Christ is The Solid Rock that I can stand on. Because everything else truly is sinking sand."

When asked, "how do you express your thankfulness? The answers were: "I want to do something, to write thank you cards or send a note; I want to sing; I want to do something for someone else, out of gratitude to God."

The truth is, the lepers in this story, all ten of them, are all just like us. All of these people were unclean. Once they were infected with leprosy. Not one of them could be in the closeness of the community anymore. And not one of them was any better than another one, regardless of how rich or poor they were, regardless of their race or color. It didn't matter, either, if they had leprosy all over their bodies or in just one little spot. Once the priest declared them unclean they were cast out – away from the rest.

That's exactly the way it is with sinful humanity. Once we were infected with sin, we were unclean. It does not matter who we are, how good we try to be, how high class we are, how nice we dress, how educated we are. It matters not if we are the native born, or the foreigner. We are mixed in with the rest – all of us the same in God's eyes – unclean – just like the ten who had leprosy.

The real significance here is found in God. This is God, whose love flows deep from His own heart; who is merciful and so desires to bring us back to the community; so wants to restore us to wholeness that he comes right into our midst. He just surprises us and suddenly is here among us in the flesh! All are offered healing and freedom from the bondage that holds us down.

But the one – the foreigner comes back and throws himself at the feet of Jesus to thank and praise him. And Jesus says the thing that is truly significant. Your faith – your faith has made you well. The word in Greek is *sozo*. It is also translated as “made you whole” – or – “your faith has saved you.”

It is faith in Jesus that gives us the true restoration, the total healing and reconciliation we receive in salvation through Him who was sent by God. And the surprise to those around Jesus was that this salvation was extended, not just to the chosen ones – the Jews – but to a Samaritan, a foreigner, as well.

The Good News is that whether you are one who has been a long time church member, but have been frozen with rules and inhibitions that have kept the faith from flowing from the head to the heart, or if you are one of the foreigners in life – an outsider; an outcast – Jesus welcomes you, heals you, restores you, and gives you new life in Him. Your faith has made you well. It is your faith that makes you thankful. It is your faith that brings you back to the feet of Jesus to express that praise. It is your God given gift of faith.

What are you thankful for? How do you express it? How do you respond to the blessings in your life? Is your thankfulness different because you are a person of deep faith? If I had nothing else to claim, in all the world, that I could be thankful for, I could still be thankful that God loves me so much that He sent his only Son into my life to be my Savior and my friend – to restore my life and give me salvation.

And beloved, that gift of love is extended to all of you as well. What are you faithful people thankful for? How do you respond to your many blessings?