

"Where Are the Nine?"
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, OH
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Text: Luke 17:11-19

On a whim a man decided to get his wife a dozen roses and surprise her after work. The minute he opened the door, his wife started yelling, "This is the worst day I have EVER had! The kids have been terrible; the washing machine broke and flooded the laundry room; the dog chewed up my new pair of shoes..." Then she noticed the flowers he was holding, "...and now you've obviously done something wrong!"

This silly little story sort makes me think of the annual stewardship campaign at church. Your pastor and stewardship committee believe we are presenting you with a bouquet of roses, but we worry that you might take it as something for which we have to apologize. We know the common perception that churches are always asking for money, and we know most people don't like it.

For most of us, money is a highly personal matter, and demands placed upon it seem an invasion of privacy—like rummaging through the medicine cabinet of a home where you are a guest. Curiously, Scripture exhibits little of this discomfort regarding the responsibility to give money. From Old Testament times, the "offering of first-fruits," a 10% tithe on one's annual income, was seen as a basic response to the God from whom all blessings flowed. Jesus spoke about money more often than he talked about prayer, heaven, or anything else.

Our morning text is not one of these passages, however. It is instead an account of something else the gospels indicate occupied a good portion of Jesus' time and energy: healing, in this case the gift of healing to ten persons who had the disease known as leprosy. What's the connection between giving and gratitude? between grace and generosity? between salvation and stewardship? Perhaps the key to understanding lies not so much in an answer but in a question Jesus poses to one of the lepers. Let us bring our anxieties about money, our discomfort about stewardship, even our irritation about the continual invitations to give, give, give—bring them all before the One who asks, "Where are the nine?" Listen for God's Word in the reading from the gospel according to Luke in the seventeenth chapter at the eleventh verse. [LUKE 17:11-19]

This is a fairly straightforward text isn't it? Don't be like the nine ingrates—return and give thanks to God who has healed and blessed you. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the subtext when it is read during stewardship campaign season: how grateful are *you*? Prove it—with an increased pledge.

But before we all nod knowingly and then nod off—notice two curious things about the encounter between Jesus and the ten. First, they were all healed:

regardless of their personal doubts,
their lack of acknowledgement let alone gratitude,
the condition of their lives prior to their illness.

They were healed, every last one of them. Now this is significant because in the ancient world, illness was thought to be the result of sin, God's punishment for wickedness or at least God's withholding of blessing. But here there is no sorting out, no determination of worthiness; just overflowing mercy to human need. Jesus revealed the very nature of God to be giving and gracious, intent on loving creation and bringing it—bringing us—to wholeness and abundant life.

Then why Jesus' disappointed reaction to the nine's lack of gratitude? He healed them all, and must have known their joy in having their lives restored. If you ever saw the movie *Ben Hur*—the scene depicting the misery of the leper cave— you have an idea how terrible the lot of a leper was. The disease had no cure, and was thought to be highly contagious. The leper, therefore was cut-off from the community—required to live quarantined from family and friends, prevented even from entering a house of worship. They had approached Jesus tentatively—from a distance as the law prescribed—and respectfully: he was a well-known teacher. They had obeyed his command to “go..show yourselves to the priest.” Surely they had showed good faith, since they weren't actually healed until they had gone on their way. Yet Jesus wonders aloud, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God?”

I think you and I know many reasons other than mere forgetfulness that silences our grateful intentions. This morning I invite you to name them: to imagine ourselves as the nine healed lepers and respond to Jesus' plaintive cry, “Where are the nine?” [responses from Fairmounters included: “They were eager to reunite with their families;” “they were obeying Jesus' directive to present themselves to the priests for re-instatement into the synagogue;” “they didn't have adequate words to express their joy;”] All of these responses are understandable, reasonable, even good.

I do not believe the force of Jesus' questions were meant primarily to chide the nine for their ingratitude (remember, they weren't even there for the teachable moment!). Rather I believe his questions point to a perspective about life. The healing of the lepers was a gift to them; unearned, whether deserved or not. Jesus seems to have been saying to the gathered crowds, be aware of how gifted you are, so as not to miss the gift itself!

[Munch apple] Locally grown yellow delicious apple, \$1.50 per pound. Hiking boots, \$68. Autumn afternoon spent tramping through the metro parks with friends, stopping at a roadside apple stand.... Priceless. The Mastercard ads may be faulted for commodifying relationships, implying that the financial ability that comes from using their credit card will help provide those priceless experiences, but they are dead on in their recognition that our essential values are revealed in the way we use our financial resources. We are willing to spend money on the things we value, most of which aren't "things" at all, but intangibles such as learning, relaxing, connecting, making a difference. The one who returned to give thanks seemed to understand that gratitude grows from grace. When we sense God's hand at work in our lives, in the world, how can we be silent, contained, self-absorbed?

And what of us, you and me? Are we awake to our essential giftedness? Have we appreciated the gift of each new day? The surprising joy of familiar faces around the breakfast table, around the Lord's Table? Do we stop and marvel at the brief beauty of an Ohio autumn in its fiery farewell? Are we aware of the privilege of employment, of meaningful work and labors of love, of opportunities for travel and education? Sometimes I think we remember our gifts primarily in loss; we don't know what we have until it's gone. But why wait?

There is an old Jewish tale in which a disciple asked his teacher: "What must I do to become wise?" The teacher responds: "As little as you must do to make the sun rise in the morning." "Then what--?" sputters the disciple. "What use is all this prayer and worship and service?!" And the teacher concludes: "To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise." Don't go through life asleep, unaware, oblivious in the rush of daily chores and busy schedules, to the gift you hold in your heart, in your hands, in every breath you take.

Behind a gift of course, stands a GIVER. Perhaps this is Jesus' main reason for seeking the nine who were healed and did not turn back. To say "Thank you" is to acknowledge the "you" behind the gift, to acknowledge the relationship upon which love depends.

God has reached out to humanity and our thank you is like our outstretched hand taking hold. We know ourselves to be connected to the Source of life. Unconditionally. Eternally. And that makes it possible to give thanks even when the outcome was not what we wanted, even when confronted with disappointment, grief, pain. God is with us; God will be with us, come what may. So we sing *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*; and *not* "Praise God so that the blessings flow."

The stewardship campaign this year is predicated upon a single vision of God's love and blessing upon this faith community. We have been gifted with a rich history, a beautiful building, creative, talented members, a committed staff, programs and dreams in support of a solid mission. We are different people, whom God has called for a single mission. In the matter of stewardship I believe the church is to act more like a thermostat than a thermometer: we must not just keep track of change; we must initiate it. We must turn up the heat in this place and in the wider community; turn up the heat with the fire of justice and the transforming power of love.

We are different people with different gifts and different abilities. We may value different aspects of Fairmount's ministry and mission, and over the next few weeks, you'll hear the different ways they touch people's lives: through music, through outreach, through children's education, and youth ministry. At the heart of it all, however, is one single reality: we are Samaritan lepers one and all—in need of God's mercy and grace, recipients of divine love no matter what.

Annual upkeep on our fine church building...\$250,000. Annual personnel costs for program and support staff....\$750,000. Experiencing God's grace and healing; discovering new purpose and possibilities.....priceless.

So let our stewardship of money, time, energy, talents say it unmistakably: thank you, God, thank you, thank you!

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS YOU TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor