

Luke 17:11-19 A Valuable and Undeserved Gift

It is generally agreed upon, I think, that manners are a good thing to teach a child.

So we teach them to say “please” and “thank you,” right? Ever heard them say “thank you” when they obviously really didn’t mean it? It’s hilarious. “Say thank you.” “Thank you!” I mean I guess that’s modeling the right behavior? But let’s face it, it’s the same for us, even if we are better actors, some “thank yous” are more sincere than others, right?

So what brings about a sincere thank you? I think the most sincere thank yous come about when the gift is valuable, and unexpected or perhaps more on the nose: un-deserved.

In our Gospel lesson we hear of a very sincere thank you. I think the context of the miracle shows us exactly why. Leprosy is a bacterial disease that decays your flesh. You literally rot. While not highly contagious, it was incurable at the time, so no one wanted to get too close. This forced lepers out of their homes, job, and families. They congregate together for commiseration and for some sense of community. Which is why we find a group of them today, and we find them shouting from a long way off – they know better than to get too close. “Lord, have mercy!” Is their cry.

So put yourselves in the sandals of these lepers. You haven't had any family meals, thanksgivings, celebrations, or even a hug for who knows how long. And you just thought this man, this healer, might be able to show you some hope. Instead he sends you off to the priests. No wave of the hand, no authoritative word. Just "go see the priests." Won't they just turn you back and cast you out again as a wretched leper? But then, miraculously, suddenly, someone notices something is different, something is healed... Can you picture them jumping with excitement and shock, peering beneath robes and bandages to check their sores repeatedly to make sure they were gone? And when it finally sinks in - what would you do?

Would you race to the priests, afraid that if you didn't do what Jesus said your leprosy would come back? Would you race to your loved ones and family that you haven't hugged in so long? Would you jump for joy, or fall on your knees and cry? Would you stand there contemplative –soaking it all in? Or, would you go back to the one who caused this healing, and give him praise and thanks?

One of the ten did this, who knows what the other nine did? But there is even something about this one who returns that is interesting, he is a Samaritan.

Samaritans were regarded as outcasts because of some of their heretical beliefs and betrayals of Israel; likewise the Samaritans were not too fond of the Jews who looked down on them. Yet here the most unlikely person to come back, a double outcast, comes back to return thanks to a Jewish man, Jesus. So too will Jesus

receive thanks and praise from unexpected people a half a world away like you and I?

It is here Jesus tells him, “arise, your faith has saved you (sodzo – in the Greek, not healed you, saved you).” Implying that perhaps this Samaritan received more than JUST healing, but even salvation by trusting in Jesus which brings about eternal healing on the last day.

Which I think brings us to the first element of sincere thanks. The gift is valuable. It’s perhaps easier for some of us to say the eternal healing and life promised is the greater gift, and I think we all know that cognitively. But I think that’s harder to say if you have a terminal disease. So, would the leper have been as thankful if Jesus hadn’t healed his leprosy, but sent him on his way with eternal life?

And this is where we, I think, must confess our insincerity. Our chest hurts, we have a medical scare and it’s: “Lord, please I will never doubt again, please, please heal me.” And then three weeks later when the scare is gone we haven’t changed a thing in our spiritual life.

The reality is that leper got sick again with something and died. So Jesus’ gift of healing was temporary. Did that mean it was cheap? I doubt the leper saw it that way. I wonder if, perhaps, when he got sick again and Jesus wasn’t around to heal

him, perhaps he wasn't angry at Jesus, but confident in the risen King's ability to save him even from death. So I wonder which gift he thought was most valuable.

Even as the martyrs gave their lives for Jesus, confident in his eternal gift. May we ask the Lord for a perspective so valuable. To see that he is not a vending machine to manipulate our way to free healings forever. But a merciful Lord who offers, through the valley of the shadow of death, which is the wages of sin, eternal life in his kingdom that has no end. Not as a manipulation, but as a gift. One, when we begin to realize the price of that gift, where we may be tempted to say "thank you."

Especially when we have already noted our lack of sincerity. If sincere thanks is from a valuable gift that is undeserved, the fact that we at times are not sincere in our thanks to God, is it not proof that in some way we doubt the value of the gift (Oh, thanks for eternal life God, but I got a busy schedule today, sorry) or do we think somewhere deep down that we DO actually deserve it!? (Oh, well, he's giving eternal life to some people, surely it's me, I'm better than that person). You think that makes you worthy? No, the very verse before our reading today Jesus tells us we are unworthy servants even if we did do what we ought – you think it's an accident Luke goes from that teaching to this one on thanksgiving? Or maybe he wants us to make the connection that we don't deserve the gifts, just like the leper didn't. Do we honestly think we could waltz up to the King and receive a gift from him! You're a speck on a rock, a speck who thinks they are something when

they are not. No, I dare say your pride, or your independence, along with your waffling feeling and sincerity, are the very reason you don't deserve the gift. A gift given at the price of the innocent Son of God's life no less! How's that for a price?

But at this point perhaps we should remember the reason we are saying "thank you" in the first place today: Because we have already been given the gift. The Samaritan said thanks AFTER he was healed. The child is made to say thanks AFTER he gets the birthday present. Indeed, Christ has already died for you, he has already come to you and given you faith in him – he isn't taking that back. We heard that in our epistle reading – he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself. Yes, we have wishy washy hearts, and we lose perspective on what's valuable in life, but don't let those tarnish the gift, really they can't, because it's already given! It's yours! Not by drummed up sincerity, but by grace – he wanted to give it to you. So maybe a better response is to simply confess our insincerity and poor priorities, then rejoice in the gift of forgiveness and life given by Jesus.

Imagine giving a gift to someone but it's so great a gift they feel bad for taking it, so much so they don't even enjoy it. They just feel guilt everytime they even see it. Isn't that a shame? Because the whole reason you gave it was for them to enjoy it. Jesus healed the lepers, a poor thank you it would be to walk around in bandages, avoiding people still.

He has given us a gift, eternal life! And while that may not seem as glamorous as a healing. And how desperately we pray for those healings, and how thankful, sincerely, we are when they come! But are we not mature enough to see that everyone, in this broken world dies? As we already stated - the Samaritan Leper got sick again someday. And you may think that means Jesus offers cheap gifts. But I think that Samaritan would tell you different. And I think that would overlook the fact that Jesus in giving his gifts, doesn't ask us to do anything he won't. He went to that cross. He knows pain, abandonment, forsakenness from the family "My God My God why have you forsaken me?" And he would pay that price for him, for you. Not just to heal you once, but to offer eternal healing. And when that is realized, when you are before the King, and you are victorious over death... I don't think any of the thanks will be insincere. I think we will finally begin to see how much better his salvation gift is than anything else we think we needed so bad. Eternal life! And you are living it now. And yes we know this life now is broken, yes, but why is that a reason to not enjoy the blessings we can pull out of it? And when we meditate on those blessings, well, maybe a little thankfulness can replace our anger, or greed.

And so thanks comes in prayer, in song, in action – doing what our King would have us do. But it all begins and ends, no, I take that back, it never ends, it begins and continues because of the gift. His life for yours, priceless, undeserved, but

yours for free in real time and space, no taxes, fees, or hidden payment plans. Just
grace. Thanks be to Jesus.