

## **“20/20 Gratitude”**

**Luke 17:11-19**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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It was the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and the children brought a platter full of excitement to Sunday school with them. In keeping with the tradition, the teacher asked each student to name something for which he or she was grateful. One by one the students mentioned things you would expect: parents, pets, toys and their favorite foods.

When the teacher asked Johnny what he was grateful for, he quickly replied, “I am grateful for my eye glasses!”

“You are thankful you can see,” the teacher said as she smiled at Johnny. “No,” Johnny replied, “I am grateful for my glasses because they keep the girls from kissing me!”

According to New Testament scholar, Dr. Alan Culpepper, seeing plays a vital role in understanding this story, which is unique to Luke’s gospel. Let me tell you how it does after I share the details of this story with you.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem when they came across a group of men who had leprosy. Luke was careful to describe these individuals as having leprosy, not lepers. Why did he do this?

Luke was a physician. He knew how a chronic and debilitating illness or handicap could attack a person’s self-esteem as well as their body. Luke never wanted to reinforce feelings of inferiority or worthlessness by labeling anyone struggling with a health issue as nothing more than the name of their disease. This was Luke’s way of treating people with respect, protecting their dignity and helping his readers understand sick people had the same need for acceptance and love as everyone else.

Earlier, Luke wrote about a man who was paralyzed rather than a paralytic and a man who had demons, not a demoniac. He knew how important it was to see the whole person, not merely one part of him or her.

According to ancient law, these men with leprosy were to keep their distance from people and shout to anyone getting too close to them the words, “Unclean! Unclean!”

Apparently these men kept their distance from Jesus and the disciples, but instead of informing them of their condition, they cried out for help.

“Master, Jesus, have mercy upon us!” they shouted.

Maybe the word, master, caught Jesus’ attention. After all, in Luke’s gospel this title for Jesus was used only by the disciples. Whatever the reason for looking their way, Jesus mercifully responded to these men’s plea for help by telling them to go show themselves to a priest, implying they would be healed by the time they reached a priest. Once there, they could be examined by the priest to receive a certificate of healing, which was necessary to be reunited with their families and reintegrated into the community.

Each man did as Jesus instructed and was healed. Miraculously, their life of loneliness, hopelessness and despair was over.

It is at this point in the story something unusual happened. One man returned to Jesus after he saw he had been healed. According to Luke, he fell at the feet of Jesus, a sign of profound humility.

With a grateful heart, this man praised God for his healing and thanked Jesus for his role in it. What made this more noteworthy was the fact this man was a Samaritan, not a Jew as the other nine were.

I suspect this is another reason Luke told this story. Most Jews thought Samaritans could do no good. Luke wanted to dismantle that perception and do his part to break down the barrier between these two groups of people.

Certainly, Jesus was touched by the Samaritan’s humble expression of gratitude, but he was surprised and disappointed only one returned. “Were not all ten cleansed?” Jesus asked. “Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

How disappointing it was for Jesus that all ten men cried out in unison for mercy when they saw Jesus, but only one lone voice was heard expressing gratitude for this miraculous gift of healing. In spite of this, Jesus directed his attention to the one who returned. “Rise and go; your faith has made you well,” Jesus told the grateful Samaritan.

**Why do you think Luke shared this story with his readers?** After all, he was the only Gospel writer to do so.

I pondered this question for a long time last week, and I kept going back to what Dr. Culpepper said about the role seeing plays in this story. I believe Luke wanted his readers to

understand there is a direct correlation between seeing what others had done for them and being a grateful, humble person like the Samaritan in this story.

Notice Luke's attention to what the characters in this story saw and how they responded, beginning with Jesus. Jesus **saw** the men with leprosy and responded with compassion to their pleas for help.

What a contrast this was to another story Luke included in his gospel, the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that story, the priest and Levite **saw** a man who had been beaten and robbed lying helplessly in a ditch, but they did nothing to help him. The Samaritan, however, **saw** the man and took pity upon him. He dressed his wounds, took him to someone who could nurse him back to health and paid all the bills associated with his recovery. In today's text, Jesus followed the example of the Good Samaritan when he paused to help the ten men who had leprosy.

In addition, one of the men in our story who had leprosy, the Samaritan, **saw** the gift of grace he had received and returned to thank Jesus, something the other nine did not do. He also **saw** the connection between Jesus and God and praised God for his healing.

Finally, Jesus **saw** this man's remarkable faith, grounded in humility and gratitude, and gave him gifts the other nine did not receive, which made his life more complete, fulfilling and satisfying.

Sight is an important element in this story. In his book, Who Needs God, Rabbi Harold Kushner says sight is a crucial element of our faith. Kushner strongly believes that religion is a way of seeing. One of our favorite hymns reminds us of this each time we sing it.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!*

*I once was lost, but now am found. **Was blind but now I see.***

There is no doubt in my mind seeing is directly related to humility and gratitude. We will only be grateful for those blessings we see which have come from God and those around us, and we will only see them through humble eyes.

**For what or for whom do you need to be grateful this week as you gather with family and friends?** Well, what do you see as you look back on your journey?

Do you see the people who blazed the trail on which you are traveling?

Do you see the people who rushed to your aid when you needed them most?

Do you see the people who came looking for you when you lost your way?

Do you see the people who stood by your side when others abandoned you?

Do you see the people who forgave you when you hurt them deeply?

Do you see the people who gave you good advice when you were confused?

Do you see the people who told you the truth when others merely told you what you wanted to hear?

Do you see the people who set boundaries for you instead of letting you go to dangerous and unhealthy places?

Do you see the people who challenged you to get out of your comfort zone and take risks when the right opportunity came along?

Do you see the people who helped you get an education or the job you now have?

Do you see the people who accepted your imperfections and loved you unconditionally?

Do you see the people who cried with you when your heart was broken?

Do you see the people who nursed you back to health when you were sick?

Do you see the people who told you how pretty you were when you felt ugly or how important you were when you felt worthless?

Do you see the people whose faith you leaned upon when yours had grown weak?

Do you see the people who have kept their promises to you even when it meant they had to make great sacrifices?

Do you see the people who have brought joy and laughter into your life?

Do you see the people who have and continue to give you hope and surround you with love?

**How have you responded to their acts of kindness?** Have you thanked them and told them about the difference they have made in your life? Is this something you could do this week as a part of your Thanksgiving festivities?

When the Samaritan returned to thank Jesus for his healing, Luke wrote that he fell at Jesus' feet. This was the normal posture of someone desperately begging for help and pleading for mercy. Evidently, the Samaritan's need to express gratitude to Jesus was as strong as his need to be healed.

**Could the same be said of you?** Are you as adamant about expressing gratitude as you are getting what you want when you need it?

Dr. Culpepper sees gratitude as the purest measure of a person's character and spiritual condition. "A grateful person reveals humility of spirit and sensitivity to love expressed by life itself, good health, friendship of others and the love of family," he writes. "A grateful person does not overlook or take for granted kind deeds and gifts that need to be valued, treasured and appreciated."

**How are you going to express your gratitude to God and others this week?** Let me encourage you not to be bashful or timid. Be as humble and expressive as the Samaritan who returned to thank Jesus.

Let me also encourage you to pass on to others what has been done for you. You may not be able to repay friends and family members who have helped you along your way, but you can pass it forward as you remember their kind deeds.

Our world is full of people who feel like these men who had leprosy. They feel unworthy of associating with respectable folk and are lonely and sad. They have no one to soothe their wounds and take away their pain. They suffer in silence wondering if anyone really cares. Most have given up hope.

**Do you and I see these people as Jesus saw the men with leprosy, or do we ignore them?** Thanksgiving, of all weeks, is a time to open our eyes so we can see the people around us who are struggling and see the difference we can make in their lives.

I hope and pray we will have 20/20 gratitude and respond to them as others have reached out to us.