

“The Untouchables”

Luke 17:11-19; Psalm 92:1-2

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I suppose the title of my sermon could lead to many interpretations. For those of you who have gray hair, you may be thinking of the television show that ran from 1959-63 on ABC, *The Untouchables*.

Robert Stack played Eliot Ness, the Chief Investigator assigned to fight crime and corruption in Chicago in the 1930's. This show led to the 1987 Oscar Award winning movie titled, *The Untouchables*, starring Kevin Costner as Eliot Ness.

Others may be thinking of a banner hanging in Rupp Arena honoring the 1995-96 basketball team that went 34-2. This team won the sixth National Championship for the Wildcats and were given this name because of their dominance throughout the season.

I am certain you will not be surprised to know the sermon title does not refer to a television show, a movie or a basketball team. Instead, it is a reference to ten men who had leprosy whose chance encounter with Jesus changed their lives forever. Listen as I share the details.

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 to 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.

Once again, Luke refused to portray Samaritans as evil and unworthy of grace. The story of the Good Samaritan preceded this one, a story that made a Samaritan a hero, not a villain.

This was contrary to prevailing opinions of that day. Most Jews thought Samaritans could do no good. Luke wanted to dismantle this 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.

You know what part of this story intrigues me most? It is the obvious level of disappointment Jesus felt over the nine men who did not return to express gratitude for the gift they had received.

Why do you think Jesus was so sad, disappointed and probably frustrated over the actions of the nine men who did not return? Were his feelings hurt?

No, I don't think so. His frustration was not about him but them.

I get the feeling Jesus believed as Jews, people of faith who had been blessed by God in so many ways, these nine men should have known better. Surely they had been taught gratitude was the appropriate response to a significant gift from God. How could they not return?

Maybe Jesus would have understood had the Samaritan not returned to say thank you. Perhaps he had not had the religious training of the nine Jews. He was completely dumbfounded, though, by the ingratitude of these nine men.

I have come to realize gratitude is a choice, and sadly many people don't always feel the need to express their appreciation to God for life and to others for their help along their journey. I wonder if some people are wired to be grateful and others are not.

We'll never know why the nine men who had been healed did not return to praise God and thank Jesus. Perhaps they had good reasons, but quite frankly, I can't think of one.

Here is what I pondered last week as I reflected on this passage. Is there a difference in receiving a gift, large or small, and expressing gratitude for it as opposed to receiving a gift and not saying thank you? I think there is.

What is the difference? The difference is in the impact gratitude has upon us.

The Psalmist wrote, "It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord and make music to your name, to sing praise to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness at night." (Psalm 92:1-2)

Why did the Psalmist feel this way? Why did the Samaritan? Why do I?

I think gratitude brings the best out in us. It is hard to be grateful and grumpy, although I know some people who are.

Ingratitude turns us inward and make us cynical, arrogant, angry, envious, jealous, fearful, suspicious and vindictive. Gratitude, however, does just the opposite.

Gratitude promotes humility, kindness, compassion and generosity. This is because gratitude enables us to see those who have helped us on our journey, along with those who need our help.

"When you see a turtle on a post, you know it did not get there by itself," someone wrote. None of us arrived where we are today without help, and lots of it, and wise is the person who acknowledges this.

Whose hands taught you a skill? Whose voice gave you directions? Whose advice kept you from making mistakes, and whose heart forgave you when you made mistakes?

Whose feet raced to you when you were in trouble? Whose fingers caressed your brow when you were sick? Whose ears listened to you when you were upset? Whose eyes looked into your soul and saw good when others saw only bad? Whose arms held you when your world came crashing down, and whose arms lifted you on their shoulders so you could reach your dreams?

Whose garden fed you when you were hungry? Whose word vouched for you when others were skeptical? Whose cheers encouraged you when you were ready to give up? Whose business provided you with your first job? Whose pocketbook opened up when you needed money? Whose scholarship made it possible for you to get an education, and whose recommendations opened doors of opportunity for you to enter?

Don't forget these people and don't forget to pass what they did for you forward. Be everything to someone else these people were to you. Use your influence and resources to be a good family member, friend, neighbor and community leader.

The only way to do this is to be grateful, as the Psalmist and the Samaritan were. Gratitude will not let us forget these dear people who shaped and molded our lives. It certainly will not let us forget those who saved our lives.

Yes, gratitude has a way of motivating us to live by the Golden Rule. This is because grateful people truly are their brother's keeper and consider others' needs as well as their own. If a decision is not good for their neighbor, it is not good for them, even if it is to their advantage.

Gratitude really is this influential and powerful. It brings the best out in us and keeps us from becoming cynical, arrogant, angry, greedy, self-centered, insensitive to others' needs and callous.

Do you realize, as a friend once reminded me, gratitude and greed start at the same place but end up miles apart? Both begin with gifts we need in order to live full and meaningful lives: talents, skills, abilities, money, possessions, relationships and opportunities. What we do with them makes all the difference in the world.

Gratitude makes us wise and generous stewards. Greed makes us indifferent and self-indulgent.

Which path are you traveling down? Which direction do those around you need you to go?

If you are like me, you face temptations every day to change directions. You want to be a grateful person who is humble, compassionate and generous, but there are times when you question whether this is really in your best interest.

How can we stay on track? How can we remain faithful to God and truly reflect God's loving and generous nature? Perhaps the key is found in this Psalm.

"It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord and make music to your name, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love **in the morning**, and your faithfulness **at night**."

The Psalmist was committed to thanking God every morning and evening for God's goodness and faithfulness. His expressions of gratitude were not dependent upon his moods. His mood was dependent upon his gratitude! So, the first thing every morning and the last thing every night, he concentrated on God's unfailing love and extravagant generosity.

What difference do you think this daily habit made in his life? I believe it kept him from succumbing to the temptation to change direction and head down the path of self-absorption. It prevented fear, jealousy, envy and arrogance from controlling him.

I believe it can do the same for us. I've never met anyone who sincerely said thank you to God every day that did not say it to those around them, too. Those simple yet profound words, thank you, have always developed and cultivated more friendships than any others.

Do you need to be more like the Psalmist and the Samaritan? Why not begin this week. Who will be sitting around your Thanksgiving table that needs to hear you say, "thank you"?

How would it change their life? How would it change yours? How would it change your relationship? Why not try it and find out