

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Luke 17:11-19
Don't Just Say Thanks – See Thanks
November 23, 2008
Thanksgiving Sermon

Luke 17:11-19

“On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. [12] As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, [13] they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” [14] When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. [15] Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. [16] He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. [17] Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? [18] Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” [19] Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

We begin this story of Jesus like so many: with a road map. Many times in these stories of the sayings and doings of Jesus – what the church calls the gospels or the good news – we read of theology in geography. God is trying to tell us something through the places Jesus is traveling.

Jesus is described in the region between Samaria and Galilee. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, but was found traveling through places where he did not belong. Many of us will find ourselves doing pretty much the same thing this week. We will travel to places we call home, but on the way, we will be traveling through places like Wrens, Grovetown or Thompson.

On the way Jesus was traveling through places he did not belong. Has that ever happened to you or to your children? You have heard me confess, that I am directionally challenged. Too often, I will be driving through some city and take an exit that “looks about right,” only to discover that I am in a neighborhood where I know I don't belong.

Jesus was somewhere he did not belong. But then again, that's Jesus for you. He rarely lived up to the conventions of everyone else's expectations. Moving about in places where he did not belong, Jesus is interrupted. From a distance ten lepers call out.

I am certain you feel like I do, that sometimes my life is simply an ongoing stream of interruptions? Phone calls, emails, knocks on the door, and intrusions along the hallway intervene in the course of every day. “I hate to interrupt, but...” Of course, if we pay attention to the interruptions, we just might discover God in the midst.

Ten lepers interrupt Jesus' trip to Jerusalem. Leprosy, known today by the name Hansen's Disease, is described as one of the world's oldest diseases. In the days of Jesus, when one had leprosy they were doomed to a life ostracized from the community. They could not worship with everyone else; they could not eat, drink, play, laugh or even grieve with anyone else.

They were an embarrassment to the community. In fact, according to the law they had to live outside the community. Lepers were suppose to cry out, “Unclean, unclean,” if they encountered anyone on the roadways. If you were around a leper in Jesus' day, it made you unclean and unfit to socialize with others, and you would be prevented from worshiping with your community. Furthermore, there was the belief that if you touched a leper, you would contract the disease. That is just crazy isn't it?

When I was in my late twenties and serving as a pastor of another congregation, I volunteered as a chaplain for a local hospice. About once a week or so, I would be called in to visit the home of a patient who was dying. My role was to offer spiritual care, not only to the dying patient, but to the family as well.

One of those terminal patients was my age. This was a first for me, to relate with a peer who was dying. He was dying of AIDS. For the last few months of his life, I watched him and his family suffer. We talked about God, forgiveness, and color – he was an artist, and loved light and color, and kept several different kinds of lava lamps in his room. In the last few weeks he could not speak anymore, due to the lesions in his mouth.

When he did pass away, his mama asked if I would officiate the funeral. On the day of his burial I gathered with an odd assortment of people, people that I usually do not see in church. Once again, I wondered if I was in the wrong place. But you know, I knew, I was where I needed to be.

What troubles me still today about George's passing is that I was there as a minister of the gospel representing the hospice. Now, there is nothing at all wrong in representing the hospice. I am a big supporter and advocate for hospice care when it is needed. But why was I not there representing the church? Where was the church in all of this? George made some decisions that led to some very awful consequences, that is true, but shouldn't the church still be present, still be represented? Many of you here this morning have lost someone to that disease. Some of you are anticipating the loss. If that is the wrong place, then I think the church needs to be there too.

One of the perspectives we should take in this story, is that, as a church, we represent the presence of Christ. When I looked around that afternoon at the cemetery and wondered, where was the church, I was admitting both a personal and ecclesial failure. We just did not "see" that we were needed did we?

In the story, Jesus saw, and the one leper saw, but nobody else.

My hope is that the church "see" and be represented, even when we are in the wrong place. More importantly, my hope is that you see Jesus in your midst. It may not be where you expect him to be, but then again, that is the point. We are called to be a *City on a Hill*, and that means we also have to come down that hill and be in the places others least expect us.

There are many perspectives we can take in this story. One is the obvious: we better catch up and go where Jesus is going. Sometimes it will lead us to places we may not belong, but in the end, discover that was precisely where we needed to be. But, there are other perspectives, like *seeing* and *saying* "thanks." Take those lepers – all ten of them. You and I very well could be one of the lepers in this story. Maybe we are not marginalized or ostracized by society. But there are times we are just too self-absorbed in our own limitations and failures to see what Jesus is doing among us. Lord knows, we have got many failures here among us. I know I am personally not short of failures and limitations.

The lepers saw Jesus. They even called out to him: "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.*" There is nothing wrong with their confession – they had all the right beliefs. But when Jesus cleansed them, they moved on. Only one stopped to *see* and realize what was unfolding before him.

Thanksgiving is to recognize life around us, and by doing so, to be drawn to gratitude. It wasn't that the nine other lepers were particularly ungrateful. They were, after all, doing exactly what Jesus had told them to do: "*go and show yourself to the priest.*"

Certainly, as the years passed, those nine other men healed of their leprosy looked back and were thankful for the man responsible for giving them back their life. They were able to go back to their families and

live out a normal life. Perhaps, there was at least one who was able to hold his grandchild on his knee and said a prayer of thanks. Another was able to embrace his wife and say thanks. Still, another was allowed to lie down on the packed dirt and look up into the night-time sky and gaze at its vastness and say, “thanks.” Oh yes, I am sure at some point and at some time they were grateful for what this man Jesus did for them.

But there was only one of the ten that was able to recognize the significance of the meeting with Christ when it happened – to see and say, “thanks.” Alan Culpepper writes in his fine commentary on Luke: “Gratitude may be the purest measure of one’s character and spiritual condition.” (*New Interpreter’s Bible: Luke*, p. 327) How often are we not particularly grateful of something or someone until it is gone?

This week, I read something I had written ten years ago about one of my sons. He was in kindergarten at the time and beginning his journey in the school system. The week before Thanksgiving I had lunch with him at his school. *Watching him dressed in his Native American costume – a paper grocery bag as a vest and construction paper cut out in the shape of feathers as a headdress - munching on school cafeteria food, I thought to myself "how precious this all is." One day I will look back on all of this with deep gratitude. But why wait until it is a memory? Thanksgiving is understanding the significance of the event in the here and now.* That is what I wrote. Now, both of my boys are not too many years away from graduating and I am not invited to have a special Thanksgiving meal at school. I cannot afford to wait until something is a memory before I give thanks.

Instead of searching for the perfect holiday experience, maybe we should just notice - recognize - what is going on among us, to see Jesus walking in the places where he really doesn’t belong, doing things that we really do not expect.

The day of Thanksgiving, celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November, was made official by Abraham Lincoln in 1864 - right in the heart of the Civil War, when the nation was divided against itself and with more casualties than in any other American war since. Rather obscene, don't you think? Americans, knee deep in their own blood, declaring a day of Thanksgiving. But, maybe that is the point—that we might see amidst the most impossible of surroundings, the subtle workings of God.

The one leper's seeing, involved recognizing God's deliverance and grace. What the one leper saw and what the nine others did not, was God's work in his daily experience.

Jesus has always been about the business of tromping around in places we don’t expect or look, because in our piety, we just don’t think he should be there. But I am convinced he is around all the same: He is there at the bedside drama in a hospital. He is there with the young man, who feels as though everyone has abandoned him. He is there with the single mom, who is struggling to raise her children with dwindling child-support payments. He is there with the student, who doesn’t know how to tell the parents her grades are abysmal. And every now and then, some of us see this One among us, and like the one leper, we remember to give thanks.

I close with two questions for us to consider in light of this gospel story: *What do you see?* And from what you see, *What will you do?* One saw and turned around to give thanks.

Here is what I have seen to giving thanks:

- My life: It is far from perfect – but mine nonetheless to enjoy and live fully within.
- My wife, whom I have enjoyed over twenty years of marriage, where we are still raising each other.
- My two boys, whom I admire, because they are becoming not the men I want them to be, but the men that God has created them to be.
- My dog Samson, who is getting old and feeble, but is always glad to see me when I get home.

- Beautiful books written by brilliant people, and for all those teachers that instilled upon me a love for reading.
- My back porch and yard and fires and Adirondack chairs, where I sit with people -- I love to watch the stars go by.
- I am thankful for you too
- The children and youth of this church, whose very presence blesses me beyond words.
- And yes, for our time together and the hope I have for our days ahead. May God bless us even more, so as he has these past years. Since I see it, I have to say it: Thank you.