

## THE SPIRITUAL POWER IN SAYING THANK YOU

The gospel story of the ten lepers is one that's pretty familiar and it seems pretty straightforward, not complicated. We could finish the sermon pretty quickly. Most sermons about this say "It's really important to say thank you," and you could say that the gospel of Luke today is sort of miss-manners, teaching us the importance of being grateful and thankful and that's it. And if it were just that it wouldn't be that much more than good manners that we learned growing up. In my house, my parents used this expression, I don't know if yours did but the magic word, what's the magic word? "I want a piece of cake," "What's the magic word?" It was either please or thank you, we can never remember which one, so sometimes we'd say "Thank you?" "No try again, there's another magic word." "Please?" That's the magic word. So we learned 'please' to get something and then what do you say, what's the magic word when you're done? 'Thank you.' So that is the basic stuff that probably all of you in some way, shape or form, were raised by your parents or somebody in your life who taught you good manners. And that's usually the lesson that's taken from the text, that we should be grateful and thankful. And I agree with that but I think there's more. The other sermons usually preached on this text, is that God demands thanks. And in many places in scripture, it says we are supposed to thank God, and I think gives the impression that God is sort of the ungrateful giver, like you know i gave you those things and i really want thanks and if you don't give it, I'm really going to be mad. But that doesn't really square with our view of God, a loving God who needs nothing. So maybe there's something more. So I think there is a third way of looking at this text, and the third way is quite different than the first two. The first two, thanks is important to the other person involved. And i would argue that thanks and being grateful is really important in this text to us. There's a power in being grateful, there's a power to saying thank you.

In the early to mid-80's, i signed up for one of the scariest things i had ever done. I became an AIDS buddy. What does that mean? It sounds scary just saying it. An AIDS buddy was someone who, at that time, would visit a person living with AIDS on a weekly basis. And I was very afraid. At that time, we didn't know what caused it; we didn't know where it was from. Was it from food, was it from water, was it from dogs? Believe it or not, that was a theory. And so there are all these theories and nobody knew, it was a very scary time. I was

living in Boston and I became an AIDS buddy and you had to go through a training. And it's interesting how horrible that period was. We forget it now. I sometimes have lectured at Johns Hopkins on health care and public policy. And when I lecture to the younger audience I say "I was an AIDS buddy in the 80's and how long do you think the average connection lasted, the buddy connection?" And they'd say "Two years," "Three years," "Five years," and the answer is the average at that time was two months. In two months, the person died. In two months the person died and you got a new buddy. So you had to be in a support group yourself to even deal with that horrible reality. I got assigned to a guy named Richard Tremblay. And so I ended up visiting Richard every week. And your only job was just to really show up. You weren't so much to be a counsellor, you weren't so much to be an advocate but boy did I get to see the healthcare system inside and out as he went through the horrible thing, horrible of a body just breaking down from disease and no treatment. So this is 1985/86. And Richard lasted nine months which was a record in my group. And what I remember about it and that I'm thinking about this text is one, I thought to myself, wow leprosy in Jesus time and the closest thing I could think of would be having AIDS today in the 80's when no-one knew what it was. And the second thing I thought was: in the story it points out that the person who comes back as a Samaritan, think about being gay and having AIDS in the 80's. People were getting kicked out of their homes, families weren't supporting them at the hospital. The Samaritans were a despised group. It's no accident that in the gospel Jesus is pointing out that it was a Samaritan, the group that was the outcast. So you take Samaritan okay, and then you take leper and you have Outcast of the outcast. And it's the outcast of the outcast who's the only one who comes back to say thanks to the Jewish healer, Jesus. What struck me about that story and that memory for me was how grateful I am for working with Richard during those years. You can imagine I was 25 or so, it was scary. But it just completely changed my world, changed how I thought about things; life, death. You think about things you shouldn't often think about at twenty five. And I think he was grateful for me just showing up, just somebody showing up. And we were grateful for each other and we said thank you and he said thank you. There was a lot of gratitude.

What I realized in the third way of looking at this text is that when we say thank you, we're acknowledging something very profound that we often overlook and that's that we need each other; that we cannot do it alone in this life; that we are created in relationship and in community and we can't do it alone. I could come and preach, it wouldn't be fun if no-one was here to listen. I couldn't play the piano, I couldn't organize the service. We have to thank

each other for all that we do to pull things together on a daily basis. The real power of thanking someone is not what it does for them. The real power in thanking God is not because God needs thank you. The power in gratitude is it's a spiritual reminder to us of humility, that we can't do it alone. We need other people. And when we thank we're acknowledging that. We're saying "I can't do it without you." This has profound power and there is a power in saying thank you, there's a power in humility and self-examination that is required by simply saying thank you. And that's why some people can't say thank you. You do meet people, they're not fun to be around but they just simply can't say the phrase because in their mind they really don't see a need for other people generally and they're uncomfortable to be around. I think that the power in the gospel of saying thank you cuts this way as well, with God. They're going to be times in our life where we will be like Richard was in that story or like those lepers. We're going to feel isolated, we're going to feel outcast and we're going to see Jesus in the distance and say "Master, over here, over here, I don't even feel connected to you God. I feel far away and i feel outcast." And in those moments we're healed because we're connected. And in thanking God, we're reminding ourselves that we have that connection. One of the most painful things to do in that moment when we feel disconnected is to do something very counter-intuitive and that is to thank God. I really encourage you to challenge it. In that moment, thank God.

In the story of a horrible person dying of AIDS, I've talked about how grateful i am for that in my life. This last week we really dodged a bullet on a hurricane for the most part for our country; Haiti not as much but it really [00:08:33] but you saw people responding to the Camera and saying "I have my family." "I have my family, I lost my house, I'm grateful," and it's sometimes in those moments when we're off in the distance feeling cut off and outcast by simply saying thank you, we are releasing and reminding the power that we're never alone, we are never alone, God is always with us. When we feel disconnected that's the illusion that this world perpetrates on us that we're disconnected. So thank you for coming and thank God for all that he can do in our lives.

Amen.