

"A Matter of Faith"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 28 8:30 & 11:00 AM Sunday, October 10, 2010
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 17:11-17

Once upon a time, as the ancient fable goes, two angels were sent to earth to collect all the prayers of the faithful. One was sent to receive petitions, those prayers for which people asked or requested something of God; the other, thanksgivings, those prayers that offered simple praise, adoration, and gratefulness. Each was given a basket. Now the one picking up thanksgivings chose a much larger basket than the other angel, thinking that was what would be needed. However, the one who was collecting petitions and appeals had to return to heaven over and over to get new baskets, as each one filled quickly. The angel picking up thanksgivings, in the end, returned with the same basket not even half full.

A recent Barna Research poll revealed that despite international tensions and domestic economic problems, most Americans are happy with their lives and say that their faith has a lot to do with it. Most people are happy, and credit their faith. That's interesting, isn't it? But as we hear our Gospel account this day of the ten who were healed and the one who returned to give thanks, and listen to the fable just shared, I can't help but wonder where we would place ourselves in those stories.

But before we either join the chorus of the self-righteous in chiding those ingrates or beat ourselves up for being a part of them, I want to look at this interesting and complex story with fresh eyes, because there is more to this story than a simple moral reminder that we need to live with an attitude of gratitude.

I called this story "interesting" and it is, for it enjoys no parallel in any of the other Gospels. This is the only place, Luke 17, where you will find it. Martin Luther was so enthralled with this account that he wrote a whole commentary on this passage alone. So, let's recall it just for a moment, so that the vivid and graphic nature of the story can be seen with a fresh minds-eye.

Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem and a cross, remember, was traveling through the border country between Samaria and Galilee, and, coming into a village there, he was met by ten lepers. It is hard for us to grasp this scene in its starkness, because, I don't know about you, but I don't encounter many lepers in my daily rounds. But in Jesus' day, lepers were social outcasts. Leprosy was believed to be highly contagious, and lepers were required by Jewish law to live beyond regular human settlements. So, these lepers had to depend on the charity of others for their very sustenance, while their disease, untreated, ravaged their bodies and disfigured their hands and faces. The small crowd of lepers who met Jesus that day would have been ragged, deformed, and under-nourished; and everyone else

looking on would have been horrified that he had come that close to them. To be touched by a leper was to be spiritually defiled.

Jesus, not always known for following the Jewish prescripts, seems to have no such fears of contamination, either physically or spiritually. He sends the lepers off to see the priests, who, by law and custom, were empowered to decide who was a leper and who was not. And on the way, they are cured – just like that. No confession needed, no “giving their hearts to Jesus first,” no nothing from them. They did as they were told, and that was that. And for them, it meant more than just a crippling disease was cured – it meant restoration to their estranged communities and families. They had just been given the gift of life again; God met them in their need and, in the person of Jesus, had restored them, made them whole.

And it is at this point in the story that things get interesting, in terms of the story line, and difficult, in terms of theology. Of the ten lepers, one returned to give thanks. He was a Samaritan, one, who though cleansed from his disease, was still an outcast in Jesus’ world – a foreigner, a heretic, a traitor to ancestral faith. Interesting, isn’t it? So long as they were all sick, those distinctions of race and class meant nothing. Being united in misery does that. Now that they were all healed, the old biases emerge again, though, Luke points out, with a twist: the one who is still the outcast is the one who returns to give thanks.

Jesus, of course, wonders about the others. “Where are they?” raising again the nagging human question of ingratitude. And let’s be honest. It is easy for us to look at the nine lepers with a sense of outrage. Those ingrates! These people had been healed of the worst disease they knew in their day. How could they be so forgetful, or, worse yet, so insensitive?

But before we engage in “cleansed-leper” bashing, we need to ask if we are any different. Think of the things we take for granted, the things we overlook once they have happened to us: not just getting well or being cured of some physical illness, but being warm when it’s cold outside, or being loved when we don’t deserve it, or being able to make choices unconstrained by poverty or ignorance or oppression.

And note, please, that these monumental ingrates stay healed. Insensitive and ungrateful though they may be, what has been given to them is not taken away. Nor, come to think of it, is what we have received taken away from us when we are ungrateful and unthankful. You see, apparently, neither thankfulness nor ingratitude alter the ways in which God deals with life and with us. Now we’ve entered sticky theological waters.

If giving thanks doesn’t change the outcome one way or the other, why bother giving thanks? All stay healed, you know. If careless and faithless gets you the same place as grateful and faithful, why get bogged down with this religion stuff at all? That’s a good question, you must admit.

The answer is not obvious, but is rather to be found in the very nature of this story itself, for, you see, this story is not really a story about a nice miracle with a moral thrown in for good measure, but this story is really a parable, a parable about faith. This is really a story about the nature of faith, about what sense it makes to be a religious person in a world where lepers are cleansed whether they fall at the feet of Jesus or run off full of nothing but themselves and their own self-centered delight. The love of God has nothing to do with how lovable we are; God is gracious to the creation that he loved into being even when that creation pays no particular attention. The people at home today reading their newspapers, or out on the golf course, who never even thought of coming to church, will pass the day in as much happiness and safety as we will. And doesn't that just fry your bacon?

Think about it. Wouldn't this story be more in keeping with how we would like to see God run things if those nine lepers had found themselves zapped back into lepers again as punishment for their ingratitude? Wouldn't that make us feel better if we knew that being here today would bring us some reward that those who chose to let their kids play soccer on a Sunday morning would not have? Now, we know we aren't supposed to feel that way, but let's be honest – there's some truth there.

But good old God goes on showering his love on the just and the unjust, on those who believe and those who don't know what to believe. Is there a difference, then, in what gratitude really does? The answer is obviously, "no." But let me ask the question differently, for that's what we have to do with parables. We have to ask the questions at a different level.

If there is no difference in what gratitude does for anyone, is there a difference in what gratitude means? Bingo! Now we're getting somewhere.

Stay with me just a little longer, we are near the center of this faith-story. You see, it is not that people of faith are any better than other people, or that people of faith deserve or receive special treatment from God. It's that people of faith understand how the world really works; they know what the source of goodness and wholeness and hope really are. And that makes all the difference in how they, we, live their lives.

Gratitude and thankfulness are not simply a matter of good manners, or politeness, or appropriate and automatic behavior. They are a matter of faith; specifically, they are a matter of where we look for meaning in life. To be thankful for whatever good we see or receive in life is to declare our belief in the One who gives life. And, I would contend, that makes all the difference in how we live and what we live for.

Kirkpatrick Sale, in his best-selling biography about Christopher Columbus, had an interesting comment on our culture today: "I regard (Western civilization) as a desperately sick and inwardly miserable society that doesn't realize that it is suffering from a terminal disease called affluenza." I was struck by that term "affluenza" because I fear it is an apt description of why most of us live ungrateful lives too much of the time – we suffer from affluenza, having so much and feeling

we both earned and deserve it, that sense of entitlement that is so prevalent in our corner of the world.

But scripture, the Gospel, calls us again and again away from that which we think we own or earn, and reminds us about who is the source and giver of life. You see, and here is the point of this story said as plainly as I can, if we fail to give thanks to God, we really aren't letting God down, for God's love is the common heritage of the whole human family; his love is there regardless; we Lutherans call that grace. Rather, in not giving thanks, we fail ourselves, for we must then settle for a smaller and a more shallow understanding of life and of ourselves. That's the difference gratitude makes. As David Greenhaw states in his commentary on this passage, "The sign of faith is less the healing that has taken place and more the gratitude of the one healed." Gratitude always acknowledges the giver more than the gift; and that makes all the difference in how we live our lives.

There was a Lutheran pastor who lived in the early 1600's during the time of the 30-year war in Germany. During this time of war and famine and disease, 4,000 people died in his parish in one year, and he performed all the funerals, including one for his wife. It was during this time of deep darkness that he was able to write words that were such a powerful witness of faith that we sing them with familiarity to this day: "Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices . . . So keep us in his grace and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills, in this world and the next."

I don't know about you, but I pray for Pastor Martin Rinkhart's kind of faith, as I give thanks this day for all the blessings I have known from God.

AMEN.