

Text: Luke 17: 11-19
Title: Disobeying Jesus
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I'm indebted to an essay about Thanksgiving by John Buchanan for some of this way of getting at this text.

Debi Thomas is the daughter of immigrants from India. As a teen-ager she went on a family trip back to the motherland. Debi writes of seeing a profound poverty: exhausted women with too-thin babies on their hips, men who were blind or lame, and pot-bellied children who stared at her western clothes. For an adolescent this was a first exposure to such relentless need.

But from a distance she saw two men with faces that were distorted – “eaten” as she describes them. And their hands and feet were half-missing-mottled-stumps. She asked her father, who said, “They’re sick. They have leprosy.” Debi Thomas writes this:

The train station was crowded that day, swarming with travelers, vendors, and beggars. But what struck me about those figures huddling in the shadows was how alone they were. It was otherworldly, profound and impenetrable in a way I could barely comprehend. It was as if some invisible barrier, solid as granite, separated them from the rest of humanity, rendering them wholly untouchable. Yes, their disease frightened me. But what frightened me much more was their isolation, their not-belonging.

Jesus saw the same thing.

Our text reads that Jesus was on his way toward Jerusalem, traveling the border between Galilee and Samaria. One scholar describes this as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary ... the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”

And that’s to say that Jesus was in a liminal space
between order and chaos,
between safety and danger,
between belonging and being lost....

In that space of cultural and political uncertainty, Jesus encounters ten men suffering from leprosy. Physically sick and socially rejected, they were tossed aside from family and community. Therefore, from the margins they cry out to Jesus for mercy.

Without fear, Jesus answers that they should show themselves to the priests because the priests were empowered to certify their cure – enabling them to return to family and friend. This was not simply a matter of demonstrating clear skin and passing a physician’s physical; this was also about reversing the shunning. The priests had the power to welcome them home.

Of course, there's no indication how Jesus did it.

There's no indication that he touched or prayed or spoke over them. But on their way to get verification of their healing they were healed. And so, the ten lepers continued toward their villages to find their priests. Except for the one....

Except for the one who stopped in his tracks, turned around, and went back to find Jesus. The Greek has it that with a loud voice he came back glorifying God. The word here is *doxazon* – the root from which we get “doxology.” So, imagine this one leper marching back to Jesus belting out....

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow....”

And again, the Greek reads that he falls on his face at the feet of the Jesus.

This is where the text takes an unexpected turn....

Jesus instructed the ten to go to show themselves to the priests.

Now. You can safely assume that this cadre of outcasts were living together in caves and cavern off the grid (as it were). And you can probably assume that they came from a variety of villages in the region between Galilee and Samaria. So, the instruction to go to the priests would have sent them toward Jewish villages.

Except for the one....

Except for the one who turned around – who was Samaritan. One scholar calls him the “doubly other,” outcast as both a leper and a Samaritan. And so, to whom does he go?

Does he go to the temples of Samaritan religions?

Does he go to the Hebrew priests who wouldn't receive him because of his ethnicity?

To whom does he show himself that he might get his ticket back to family and faith community?

Whatever his quandary, he disobeys Jesus, turns around, and goes back to the one who healed him. Jesus' response is:

... your faith has made well.

And the Greek word here can be translated as made well, or whole, or saved.

John Buchanan writes this in response to that:

Notice that we don't know anything about the man's religion. He is a Samaritan, but we don't know what his theology is. We don't know about his moral values, whether he was pro-choice or pro-life, for or against this or that. We don't know how he voted or how he spends his sabbath. All we know is that he recognized a gift when he saw it, returned to say thank you, and Jesus said about him, “Your faith has made you well,” which surely is to say that by Jesus's definition faith and gratitude are very closely related, that faith without gratitude is maybe not faith at all, and that there is something life-giving about gratitude.

All the Samaritan leper did was come back and express his gratitude. And Jesus says that his “faith” made him whole, well, saved him. And that’s to suggest that faith and gratitude are intimately linked, wrapped up together, maybe even the same thing....

Just a few years before he died, Lew Smedes wrote: *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir*. Smedes was a professor at Calvin College, Fuller Seminary, and a wonderfully-gifted-best-selling-writer. Years ago, I read his memoir with some of Hope’s oldest saints. They took great delight in his storytelling, his wit and wisdom, and the way his reflections opened up a gracious space for their memories.

There’s a chapter in this memoir entitled “God and a Grateful Old Man.” It’s worth the price of admission and I should probably just read it aloud for this sermon. I’m not going to do any better....

Smedes writes that gratitude and hope are intimately linked. That when gratitude comes, hope is right behind it. In part because gratitude comes “with a person attached.” There is someone behind the gift, someone who is giving the gift and in doing so is giving themselves. Gratitude recognizes the gift and the giver. And then he writes this:

I remember magnificent things and I remember little things, and I feel grateful for them both. I remember that Jesus died to do whatever needed doing to let the river of God’s love sweep me to himself, and I also remember the Velcro that makes it easy to put on my sandals. I remember my mother’s weary weeping after a long week’s labor, and I remember the pleasure Doris and I had with our first garage-door opener. Big things, little things, it matters little as long as they were gifts with a person attached.

But, then, when I thank God for being so very generous to me, I seem to imply that he must be a stingy crank to many others. When I remember that thousands times ten thousands are living out a thousand varieties of hell on earth, my joy feels self-centered and obscene to me. This is why, on my little island of blessing in this vast ocean of pain, my “thank you” always has the blues.

Beautiful.

True.

And mindful of the unspeakable brokenness of this world.

Dear friends, the Heidelberg Catechism (a confession in our tradition) is organized in three sections: Misery, Deliverance, and Gratitude. Or colloquially: Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude.

Essential to our understanding of the gospel and the Christian life is gratitude....

All that falls to us is gratitude.

All that falls to us is gratitude for the gift and the person attached.

We’ve missed the mark when we make faith about guilt or obligation or rule-keeping or confessional certainty or religious practice or whatever. But faith is finally about gratitude – and all the ways that gratitude finds expression.

Again, John Buchanan puts it this way:

The basic Christian experience is not obligation or guilt, but gratitude, gratitude for the gift of life. Gratitude for the world. Gratitude for dear people who grace and enrich our lives... Gratitude for God's grace in Jesus Christ and the gift of hopeful confidence and wholeness and wellness that comes with it.

I know that an attitude of gratitude can lead to all manner of healthy, life-giving patterns. Oprah would have us keep gratitude journals. I've told my kids to daily name the gifts for which they're grateful. Doctors will tell you that a grateful disposition can help with blood pressure and stress and immunity and all manner of indicators of well-being....

And therefore, may we be grateful people – and in that gratitude less inclined to rage, anxiety, toxic behaviors, and conspiracy theories. May we receive the gifts of each day and the givers attached to those gifts, with joy and gratitude.

But may we also recognize that as we are saved – made whole by God in Christ – the first and last breath of faith is gratitude. Simple gratitude – even in the blue of loss and brokenness.

One last thing little grammar thing....

Jesus says to the “doubly other”

Rise and go; your faith has made you well.

The Greek verb here is in the perfect tense – meaning that this one-time action will continue into the future. Chelsey Harmon puts it this way:

The faith that the Samaritan man is expressing.... isn't a one-off, it's the bedrock. His faith in God will continue to guide and bless him for the rest of his life. Because he knows who to turn to in need and in blessing, this Samaritan man is going to be alright—no matter what any priest declares. Jesus says it's so.

Amen.