

What It Means To Be Well

Thanksgiving Sermon on Luke 17:11-19 Nov. 22, 2017

We all know how meaningful it can be to be thanked for something. “You’re welcome! I was happy to do it.” Often missed is how important it is to be the one thanking.

Our story today about the 10 lepers has many fascinating dimensions to it. First of all, being a leper in Jesus’ time not only meant having a terrible disease where your body gradually rotted away, but you were also ostracized from the rest of the community, including friends and family. What is particularly heartbreaking is that people in this time thought that if you had leprosy, you were being punished for your moral transgressions or lack of faith or something. In other words, you were getting what you deserved and were now morally unfit to be around normal, God fearing folks! Suffice it to say, these folks lived a painful existence, even though their physical condition had nothing to do with any moral or spiritual failings.

One day 10 lepers, knowing Jesus was a healer, approached Jesus, pleading that he would have mercy on them. Jesus asked them to show themselves to the priest. Was he passing the buck? No, Jesus knew that because of their disease, they were ritually “unclean” and not acceptable to their community. If they were to be restored to wholeness, they would also need to be declared “clean” by the priest to be accepted back into the community.

And indeed, they were all made “clean” – healed – before they even made it to their priest. One of the 10, a Samaritan, upon being healed, turned back immediately to find Jesus and thank him. Jesus said, “Hey, weren’t there 10 of you? Why has only this foreigner come back to give thanks?” Jesus said to him, “Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

Aha! So all ten were *healed*, but only the Samaritan was *made well*. What is the difference? Turns out being healed is about the physical disease of leprosy, while being made well is about one’s whole self, one’s mind, body, spirit and relationships. And so the Samaritan understood that behind the gift of healing was a giver of the gift; so he recognized that this enormous blessing was a sign of something bigger: a relationship with Jesus -God - who is the source of healing and wellness, the one upon whom we are completely dependent for our life and all good things, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. And he said thanks.

Why didn’t the others come back? Did they feel they were entitled to a healing? Did they take it for granted? What we realize in today’s lesson is that a person can be healed and not be well. We know the Samaritan was healed, but could someone who was not healed of a disease be well? Let’s say someone has a grateful heart and relishes any blessings they have, like community and love.

I’m going to show you a 3 minute clip from the movie, “The Human Experience.” It’s about four 20 somethings from New York who decide as a part of their life journey and self-discovery to spend time in three different locations with people who are economically challenged, or health challenged, or both.

They spend 3 weeks living homeless on the streets of NY. They visit an orphanage in South America for a few months. Then they visit a leper colony in Africa.

Maybe you didn't know leper colonies even existed, but they do in societies that don't have the medical resources we do. And like in Biblical times, they are ostracized from their communities and families. But you know what? See if you can see the difference between being healed and being well.

-Show film clip-

Do you think in some ways they might be *well*? If so, what makes them well, do you think? They are thankful. No one is pretending that being healed wouldn't also be a good thing, but it's interesting in the Bible, when there is a healing, it's usually more about wholeness and wellness than just healing. It's where relationships get restored, where people are welcomed back into a community, it's where one's relationship with God is foundational.

I think for us, entitlement and pride get in the way of us being well. I don't mean the entitlement that we think lower class folks sometimes feel. I mean the entitlement of thinking that "I earned it and I deserve it, and by the way, those people over there do not!" This is when pride comes into play and we get self-righteous, even mean. And ungrateful, because what I have and enjoy is no longer a gift, it's just the fruit of my labor or my goodness or something like that. I'm supposed to have it because I earned it. This is how some people like their religion, too. Where they are in control, where they are self-sufficient, where they are somehow worthy of God.

Yet our whole faith is based on the truth that the blessings we have are gifts from God. Even the things we think we earned, we didn't. Our successes are mostly attributable to using God-given abilities in our world. We've been dependent on countless other people - and God active in those people - to get what we have today. We've benefited from living in a nation that is materially and economically blessed, with stable government, good schools, sound infrastructure. In any facet of our lives, we are beneficiaries of endless gifts that come our way. And with those things that matter most, faith, family, friends, health, we can only say "thank you." And when we do, there is no greater force for wellness on the planet.

None of this means we should pretend that everything is always great. We know all too well how often things fall apart, from our families to our work to our finances to our health. Yet in the midst of all this, as we learned from the leper colony, we still have things to be grateful for. Are we open to receiving life?

Counting your blessings, being grateful, saying thank you helps us to see that our existence and our wellness are dependent on someone outside of ourselves: God. We can't produce life, community, wellness, they are gifts that are given by our God who loves us. So celebrate this Thanksgiving that you are a dependent and always will be: dependent on the good graces of your God! Amen.