

Year C, October 13, 2019
18 Pentecost (Proper 23)
Christ Church, Mexia

“In some regions of Mexico hot springs and cold springs are found side by side, and because of the convenience of this natural phenomenon, the women often bring their laundry, boil their clothes in the hot springs, and then rinse them in the cold springs. A tourist was watching this procedure and commented to his Mexican guide: ‘They must think Mother Nature is generous to supply freely such ample, clean hot and cold water.’ The guide replied, ‘No, Señor, there is much grumbling because she supplies no soap.’” (Hodgin, 928) In today’s gospel reading, Jesus heals ten lepers and only one returns to thank him. It seems like a simple story with an obvious lesson, but is it?

First, we should consider what it was like to be a leper in the 1st century. It was almost better to be dead than to be a leper. And by the way, any kind of skin disease or blemish could be considered to be leprosy, what we call Hansen’s disease today. And today we know that it is treatable; they didn’t. They thought lepers were evil and unclean, and that their condition was brought on by the sins they had committed. Therefore, it was easy to exclude them from EVERY part of community life, and, of course, they thought this condition was radically contagious. In some cases, it was thought that to cross even the shadow of a leper would risk infection. Thus, such harsh treatment/isolation was undoubtedly deemed necessary by them.

So lepers had to stay at a distance, no closer than 40 paces, to life as it was then lived, according to some sources. They could not eat, worship, live, walk or talk among normal people. They had to survive and fend for themselves as best they could. Thus, they lived in almost total isolation, cut off from their home and family, with no loving contact. They had no choices, no options, and no hope. This was the plight of a leper in the 1st century. Can you only imagine what this felt like?

And who decided whether or not you were a leper? The priests – that’s why Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. So they can reclaim their part in society by being judged to be cleansed of the disease. Therefore, Jesus did more than heal their physical problems; he restored their life. But only one returned to thank him, and he was a Samaritan. We don’t know the origin or nationality of the others; the implication is that the OTHER, the one considered to be an enemy and inferior was the one who showed gratitude.

Gratitude is a powerful gift when shared. A University of Georgia study showed that there was one primary factor that contributed to successful, long-term marriages, and that was gratitude. There is also evidence that gratitude is a stress reducer and that grateful people are more hopeful. It has also been shown that gratitude improves your immune system. So, there are benefits to

you for expressing thanks. Let me illustrate this point further with a story told by Mother Teresa at the 1994 National Prayer Breakfast:

“One evening we went out, and we picked up four people from the street. One of them was in the most terrible condition. I told the sisters, ‘You take the other three: I will take care of the one who looks the worst.’ So I did for her all that my love could do. I put her in bed, and there was a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand as she said two words only, ‘Thank you.’ Then she died.”

I could not help but examine my conscience before her. *What would I say if I were in her place?* My answer was very simple. I would have tried to draw a little attention to myself. I would have said, ‘I am hungry, I am dying, I am in pain,’ or something. But she gave me her grateful love. And she died with a smile on her face. *Gratitude brings a smile and becomes a gift.*” A wonderful way to remember the effect of gratitude.

Were the other nine ungrateful?” you may ask. Probably not, especially considering what I just told you about their situation. Maybe they just got carried away with their celebration, their good fortune, their plan for what they would do once they were certified to be clean. Or maybe they didn’t truly understand the gift that Jesus had given them. Maybe we don’t truly understand the gift that Jesus has given us.

John Buchanan says about the one who returned, “All we really know about him is that he recognized a gift when he saw and experienced it, that he returned to say, ‘Thank you,’ and that Jesus said to him, ‘Your faith has made you well.’ That is surely to say that by Jesus’ definition, faith and gratitude are very closely related, that faith without gratitude is not faith at all, and that there is something life-giving about gratitude. ...

The basic Christian response to God is (or should be) gratitude: gratitude for the gift of life, gratitude for the world (– God’s creation), gratitude for the dear people God has given to enrich and grace our lives.”

Do we show our gratitude to God by our stewardship – by what we give to God’s church, by how we treat God’s creation and/or try to protect it, by our prayers of thanksgiving? Or are we too caught up in the things of this world, taking for granted what we have received? Or do we spend too much time reflecting on what is wrong in our lives?

God has blessed each of us beyond our ability to comprehend, and through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, has given us an incredible choice, an invaluable gift. Do we recognize this? How do we express our gratitude? Think about it, so we will not be like the nine who didn’t return.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen