

As You Go, Give Thanks

Luke 17:11-19

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

October 12, 2025/Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Thanksgiving Sunday

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, the theme and the Scripture passage could probably not be more obvious.

We have what appears to be a fairly straightforward object lesson on the importance of saying thank you.

But as always, there are layers to texts, and there is a bit more going on in this story than might first appear.

When I was a kid, I was taught that one of the ways to approach a story is to look at it through the lens of the five Ws (who, what, when, where why?).

I've done this before with this story and I'm doing to do it again today. I think we'll see that there is more going on than a nice tidy object lesson for promoting gratitude on Thanksgiving Sunday.

So, we've heard the story. Let's look at the 5 Ws. Starting with:

Who?

Well, we have **Jesus**. Obviously. This enigmatic figure who is turning heads and ruffling feathers.

We also have **Lepers**. Ten of them.

Leprosy was/is a bacterial infection that led to lesions on the skin, and permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes.

Aside from the physical effects of this disease, there was a social stigma attached to it in all parts of the ancient world. It was (and is) highly contagious and so lepers were often quarantined and not permitted contact with others.

(We know a bit more about quarantine and social stigma in 2025 than last time I preached on this passage in 2019, just before Covid!).

In the Jewish world, lepers would have been ritually unclean and forbidden from participating in the rituals and worshipping life of the people of Israel.

Leviticus 13 contains a long list of which skin diseases made one unclean and the steps the priest must take to decide upon who is clean or unclean, healed or not (it's a list that includes an uncomfortable passage about if and when someone who is bald could be declared "clean" 😊). In this passage we read:

⁴⁵ "Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'"⁴⁶ As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.

This is why the lepers keep their distance as Jesus approaches them. This is why Jesus later will command them to show themselves to the priests not a doctor to verify that they were healed (or "cleansed" – the words are used interchangeably).

We also have one leper, in particular—a **Samaritan**. As we read, Jesus is in the region between Samaria and Galilee.

Samaritans, as we know, were not looked upon kindly by Jews.

The division of these two people groups went all the way back to the time after the death of Solomon when Israel's allegiances were split between Solomon's son and one of Solomon's former officials.

What followed were periods of conquest and intermarriage and the development of two streams of tradition regarding worship and identity.

The general Jewish view of Samaritans was that they were traitors who couldn't be trusted as well as illegitimate heirs of God's promises.

Finally, we have the **priests**, the guardians of Israel's rituals, the managers of the system that everyone depended upon to have access to God, forgiveness, ritual purity, and belonging.

Where?

Jesus is *on the way* to Jerusalem, in the region between Samarian and Galilee. He's set his face toward the city where he knows he must go.

Perhaps more significantly, Jesus is kind of in "the borderlands," far from centre of religious and political power. The climactic events of Jesus' story take place in Jerusalem, but it's worth remembering that a large chunk of Jesus' ministry and miracles took place in "the sticks."

Even the geography of Jesus' ministry speaks volumes about who he was and what he was about.

When?

We are kind of at the midpoint of Luke's narrative of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is already seen as a lightning rod, figure of controversy, there is conflict building with religious establishment of Israel.

The kingdom of God is being proclaimed. People are being divided. Some are eager for its coming, filled with curiosity and wonder. Others resist it.

So, we're kind of mid-way geographically between Jesus' hometown and Jerusalem, and midway in terms of Luke's gospel, between birth and crucifixion.

What?

Well, healing, of course.

And, as we have seen from the previous description of the social and communal effects of leprosy, these healings would have been *much* more than restoring physical health.

This is a healing that goes far beyond the physical realm. It would have had profound social, relational, and spiritual implications.

Again, in the story, the word “healed” is used interchangeably with “cleansed.” They would have been physically healed, yes, but also declared ceremonially clean.

This was restoration to community, to social and religious life, perhaps to being with loved ones they hadn’t been permitted contact with for years.

It would have been like quite literally giving these ten people their lives back. Or giving them new lives entirely.

Why?

To proclaim Jesus’ power over death, suffering, sin, disease, and everything that is not as it should be.

In the gospels, healings are always more than physical healings. They are a sign of the kingdom—a sign of God’s inbreaking into history, a sign of the fulfillment of the words of the prophets.

Jesus’ miracles always point *beyond*—they are never ends in and of themselves. They are not magic tricks to prove that Jesus has special powers.

They are always meant to invite people into the broader reality of God moving to redeem and restore his world and his people.

So, that’s the story.

I’ve preached on this sermon a few times before, but as is so often the case when I return to a familiar text, I am always struck by something new.

This is a common experience with Scripture—it retains this ability to surprise us.

And we never read a passage as exactly the same people, either. We read the same stories at different points in our lives, with different things going on, different joys, struggles, challenges, questions, etc.

This time, I noticed two things.

First, I was struck by the last line of the story: “Your faith has made you well.”

Jesus says this four times in Luke’s gospel. Twice, it’s translated “Your faith has made you well” and twice “your faith has saved you.” But in the Greek, the phrase is identical.

The Greek word that is translated “saved” or “made you well” has a range of meanings that encompass physical healing, forgiveness of sin, physical rescue, spiritual salvation. So, English translators have to decide what works best in the context.

(Interestingly, I had a fascinating conversation with someone just this week about the art and science of translation. Every translation involves interpretation—there’s no such thing as a “literal” translation where we just mechanically swap out Greek words for English words. If we did, the text would be unreadable. And it wouldn’t address the larger issue of the meanings of words which are always embedded in linguistic context, social context, etc.)

But you didn’t come to church for a lesson on theories of translation!

Back to the four times Jesus uses this phrase in Luke’s gospel:

1. 7:50 – to a “sinful woman” who anoints his feet in the home of Simon the Pharisee
2. 8:48 – to a woman who has been suffering from hemorrhaging for 12 years who touches the hem of his cloak and is healed
3. 18:42 – a blind beggar on the road to Jericho who won’t shut up and insists upon mercy
4. And in our text this morning. A Samaritan leper.

Two women. Two men. All profoundly vulnerable. All outsiders by virtue of their sins or their afflictions or their religious identities.

In the case of our story today, it was a combination of an affliction and an identity. A leper *and* a Samaritan.

It's also worth paying attention to how Samaritans are portrayed in Luke's gospel. They are mentioned three times specifically:

1. In chapter 8, a Samaritan village rejects Jesus. James and John want to call down the fire of vengeance upon them, but Jesus rebukes them.
2. In Luke 10, Jesus tells perhaps his most well-known story, the parable of the Good Samaritan.
3. And our text today where the Samaritan returns to give praise and thanks to God for his healing.

In each case, Jesus upends expectations and recalibrates our orientation to the "other." Jesus will not allow us to keep our cherished ideas of "those people" who we are better than, who are worthy only of God's contempt, who are "the problem."

Uncomfortably, Jesus makes Samaritans the heroes of his stories.

Ok, once *again*, back to the four stories of those said to be "saved" or "made well" by their faith.

What does the faith that Jesus commends look like?

1. Devotion (the woman who anoints his feet)
2. Desperation (all four stories)
3. Gratitude (this story about the ten lepers)

In none of the four stories where Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you/made you well," is faith portrayed as a nice tidy package of belief or well-honed moral system.

It's not an intellectual system or a political agenda. It's not a wellness strategy or self-help program. It's not an attainment of a certain level of holiness or devotion.

Faith looks simply like crying out to Jesus for relief. And giving thanks for the kindness and goodness of God.

That's it. That's the kind of faith Jesus commends. That's the kind of faith that Jesus says can save us and make us well.

We would do well to ponder this—on Thanksgiving Sunday and throughout the year!

The second thing that stood out was verse 14:

And *as they went*, they were cleansed.

As they went. The healing happened on the way. The cleansing happened on the way.

Jesus heals in all kinds of ways in the gospels. Sometimes he heals by touching someone, other times by being touched. Sometimes he heals with a spoken word other times through prayer. Sometimes he spit in the dirt to create mud and rubs it in someone's eyes (one of the odder methods, in my view!). Sometimes, he tells someone to go wash in a pool, other times healing power just seems to radiate out of him (as in the crowd in Luke 6).

Here, Jesus simply sends the ten lepers on a road trip. *Go, show yourselves to the priests.*

And ***as they went, they were cleansed***. Jesus didn't heal them and *then* tell them to go show themselves to the priests.

He does this in Luke 5 when he heals a single leper with the touch of his hand. But here, the ten lepers are healed/cleansed *as they went*.

I wonder how far they got on their way to the synagogue before they realized that they had been healed. Maybe it happened a few steps into the journey. I like to think Jesus let them get almost to the priests' door before they realized what had happened! 😊

Perhaps I'm guilty of making too much of these three words, but I wonder if sometimes the same is true for us. We experience the healing, the cleansing, the "saving" and "making well" of Jesus as on the journey, as we are on our way.

Sometimes, it's quick; other times, it's a gradual process.

Sometimes, we've been crying out to God for relief in some area of our lives, perhaps for a long time.

And we keep on walking. And one day, we look up and realize that we have been made well. Or that the needle has moved slightly, that things have changed, that a relationship feels

better than it used to, or we have gained a measure of mastery or control over some sin that we had struggled with for years.

I've shared this before, but when I was walking the Camino back in May, I expected my knee to be a source of constant pain throughout my journey. I've had a partially torn ACL for the better part of the last decade.

I had a strap around my knee, a tensor sleeve in my backpack in case I needed it. I prayed that I would be able to complete the journey.

And then I just walked. And walked. And kept walking. And about four days in, I realized that my knee hardly hurt at all.

And this is where I think it is appropriate to pull out the obvious lesson from today's story.

If/when we experience the healing, the making well of God along the way—however dramatic or not—we should return to give thanks.

Just this week, I received a bit of good news about someone for whom I have been praying for a long time.

It wasn't anything as dramatic as healing from leprosy, but it was a small sign of hope. My instinct (I'm kind of embarrassed to admit) was to just kind of move on.

But I was driving down the highway, and this story came to mind. This is one of the side-effects of preaching for a living, you always have some story or stories in your head on a given week that God is working on you through. 😊

And I paused to give thanks to God for this little interruption of hope—this “making well” on the way.

Gratitude is an expression of the faith that Jesus says can save us and make us well.

And it doesn't have to be in response to dramatic healings or even things going well in our lives.

On Thursday afternoon, I covered a chapel service at the jail, and I asked the guys around the circle if they could name one thing for which they were thankful.

A prison chapel, on one level, is not the most obvious context for gratitude. But the guys didn't need a whole lot of prompting.

One guy said that he was thankful he got a chance to talk to his parents that day. Another guy said he was thankful that someone gave him a packet of salt at lunch.

Another guy simply said he was grateful to be alive another day.

Do we pay attention to these little graces in our daily lives? Do we receive these little things as gifts, or do we assume that they are something that we are owed?

Gratitude is not primarily a wellness technique or a mental health strategy, effective as it might be in these areas (I'm not against having a gratitude journal!)

Gratitude is a response to the grace of God which shows up on countless ways, in big ways and in small ways, in obvious ways and in less obvious ways as we go, every day of our lives.

And gratitude is an act of faith. The kind of faith that saves us and makes us well.

So, as you go... As you make your way on life's journey... as you cry out to God in devotion and desperation for all that you need and as you experience the healing of Christ in whatever form it comes.

Give thanks. Not just on the weekend in the calendar that we set aside for this, but throughout the year.

And hear the voice of Jesus saying to you, "Your faith has made you well."

Amen.

