

*"Gratitude"*

*Psalm 66:1-12; Luke 17:11-19*

*October 12, 2025*

*Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

Let me see if I have this right. In the story we just heard, Jesus is going to Jerusalem. That's Gospel-speak for "he's going to his death." On the way he passes through the border region between Samaria and Galilee. Samaritans are on one side, Jews on the other, both of which regard the other as spiritually dead. In this "no man's land" he meets ten lepers, people who are treated as socially, ritually and spiritually dead. So this must be a story about....death?

Well, kind of. It is really a story about the gift of life out of death. And it is about gratitude: the kind of heart-felt thanksgiving that comes when we understand that God gives life even in the realm of death.

Leprosy was, and remains, a death sentence. You are socially set apart so as not to infect the rest of the community, long before your last breath. If you want to appreciate this as a visceral experience, remember how many of us felt due to the isolation required by the COVID-19 pandemic.

So these living dead, religiously mixed and socially outcast, encounter Jesus. *"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"* Somehow they knew him. Perhaps the news of his healing ways preceded him. We don't know. We do know that they threw social propriety to the wind, shouting out like that. What did they have to lose?

*"Go show yourselves to the priests,"* Jesus tells them. Hmmm.....which priests? You see, later in the story one of the ten is identified as a Samaritan. But not all of them are. A Samaritan would have gone to Mount Gerazim, not to Jerusalem's temple. A factoid, some might muse, except if you have a deadly, socially isolating disease, wouldn't you want to get it right? You don't take a statin for high blood pressure, which can kill you if untreated. You want to get it right.

Curious, too, that Jesus doesn't say, *"Be healed!"* or bestow spit or mud or command them to wash or perform any other intervention typical of other Gospel healing stories. He tells them to do what lepers do AFTER

they become physically clean. The role of the priests was to confirm the cure and perform the ritual that readmitted the cured leper to society. Jesus tells them, while they are still diseased, to act as if they are cured.

So they do. They go. Maybe in disbelief. Or disappointment. Or confused since they were still so obviously sick. Maybe they went with faith and confidence that they would be healed. All we know from the story is that they went and were cleansed on the way. Life out of death.

Now one of them, as soon as he realized his leprosy was gone, turned back. This man was twice dead. The leprosy made him physically and socially dead; and his Samaritan nationality made him spiritually dead in the minds of Jesus' Jewish listeners. Samaritans were the legacy of intermarriage between Jews and Assyrians after the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722-721 B.C. They were religious, cultural and spiritual half-breeds to devout Jews.

In our time the word might be "immigrant," too often spoken of with disdain and with the clear message that they are "less than," as if nearly the entire of America were not immigrants, or naturalized immigrants, or descended from immigrants. As if they were not also children of God.

So imagine the response of Jesus' Jewish listeners. They must have been scandalized, as they were by the story of the Samaritan who showed mercy in Luke 10, when this Samaritan returns to give thanks. This twice-dead leper ignored Jesus' instructions and returns expressing gratitude.

But while the Samaritan was "*praising God in a loud voice,*" Jesus seems preoccupied. "*Where not ten made clean? The other nine, where are they?*" he asks. It's a funny question since the other nine were going to do exactly what they were told to do.

That's just the point. Gratitude can't be commanded. It arises from the heart. It sees life, and the world, as a gift, not an entitlement. Gratitude understands that the world, and life, owes us nothing. Nothing. The life of gratitude aligns body, mind and spirit in praise of the Giver of all gifts.

That doesn't mean we don't face trouble if we're grateful. Far from it. But we face that trouble from a place of confidence. Jesus said to the Samaritan, "*Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*" The

Greek word for “*well*” is “*sozo*.” We think of a state of wellness as “curing,” but it really means that your faith has saved you, made you whole, and rescued you from destruction.

There are many ways we experience this power of salvation and the gratitude that arises from it. Here at Woodbury UMC, we have been on a 7-month journey using the power of personal testimony from our members and friends to share how God works in our life. Embedded in all of these stories is a sense of gratitude.

For what are you grateful today?

Yes, you’ve got a grocery list and a car repair and an annoying relative and hope the pastor doesn’t preach too long because football is on television this afternoon. And maybe, like some for whom we have prayed and will continue to pray, you have bigger fish to fry in terms of attention to physical health, whether for yourself or another. Maybe you, or a relative or friend, are affected by the government shutdown. And maybe, maybe, you are grieving a loss, the reminder of which sometimes sneaks up on us when we least expect it. Or the church’s call to submit names to be remembered on All Saints brings it into sharp focus.

Still I ask: for what are you grateful today?

Some of you may know that I am a list-maker and a list-keeper. You may have even seen my list. Heaven help you if you are on my list! Keeping a list generally works well for me. It keeps “to do” tasks front and center. It helps me not forget important things. There is satisfaction in checking off items and revising the list every couple of days.

But as I wrote this sermon I remembered a spiritual discipline that I know about but have not practiced: to keep a gratitude list. It is easy, is it not, to run pell-mell through the day, attending to this and that, and never stopping to express thanks: to God, to our spouse, to our neighbor, to anyone who has helped us along life’s rocky road? It is easy, is it not, to focus solely on what we lack and not on the abundance we’ve been given through no efforts of our own? In short, it is easy to neglect gratitude.

So there’s a space in this morning’s bulletin for you to write things for which you are grateful in the last week. I’ve only suggested three: you can

write more if you wish. You can write them now if you wish. Some forms of spiritual practice, and some individuals, do this at the end of every day: asking the question of their children *"What was the best part of your day?"* or asking of themselves, *"For what am I grateful today?"*

Back to the Samaritan and his gratitude, and us. We know what it is to be rescued, to be saved. That is the heart-felt place from which the Samaritan returns to Jesus. And though the other nine lepers were doing exactly what they are told, we can appreciate Jesus' hope that they might have turned around, if only for a moment, and said *"Thank you very much."*

You see, we know people whose bodies have been cured but who are bitter about life or indifferent to others. And we know people with serious, even life-threatening physical illness, who are not diminished in their gratitude to God for each day and each relationship. Henry Ward Beecher, the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist preacher at the Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn, New York, once observed:

*"If one should give me a dish of sand and tell me there are particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my clumsy fingers and be unable to detect them; but let me take a magnet and sweep through it, and the almost invisible particles would be drawn to it. The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day, as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find some heavenly blessings."*

**"The Joyful Noiseletter," Vol. 13, No. 9, 1998**

I will always think of young Ben Keyes, my high school friend's son, whose cancer defeated his 12-year-old body but not his spirit. I will always think of some of you who have shared your, and your loved ones, struggles with illness but whose faith and gratitude has made you *"sozo:"* saved, healed, whole.

Out of gratitude the Samaritan returned to Jesus. Out of gratitude he gave Jesus what he had: the ability to praise and adore him in a loud voice. Body, mind and spirit were united in one being and in peace with God. May the God who constantly bestows grace and mercy on us find in us a welcome home for such mercy, and find in us worthy vessels for pouring out in gratitude those gifts entrusted to our care. Amen.