

November 19, 2023

Turning Back to Thank

Luke 17:11-19

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

I had to laugh this week when I received an email asking about our grievance group. Obviously, it was a mistaken word choice, but I laughed just the same. Can you imagine us having a group to air our grievances? Who knows, maybe we should start it. I suppose it could be cathartic. More likely it would just reinforce our natural impulse to complain. If we are not intentional, any group, in the church or otherwise, can become a grievance group.

Now don't get me wrong. Sometimes we need to air our grievances. Sometimes we need to say out loud what is bothering us so we can get some kind of resolution or to release resentment. Yet there is always the risk when airing grievances of devolving into unproductive complaining, further fueling anger and division. Too often, our grievances mask the real wounds that need tending.

There is a stretch of our morning walk called the promenade. It is a beautiful, paved path with panoramic views from Signal Hill. At each end of the promenade is a stone pillar which has become part of a morning ritual for my husband and me. One of those pillars we call the stone of seething. It is the place where we pause to lay down our grievances with one another. Thankfully, we pass by this stone most mornings. The last time we used it was when I booked our flight to General Assembly on Spirit Airlines. Dave was not happy.

Though we seldom use it – it is there if we need it.

The other stone pillar we touch every morning. We call it the stone of appreciation where we share one thing we appreciate about the other. The stone of appreciation is not optional, we have to come up with something. Sometimes its pretty lame, like, "I appreciate you emptying the dishwasher." Other times, we dig deeper to affirm one another, and in a variety of ways say to one another, "I see you. I see what you are doing. I see how you care. I see and appreciate you."

It is a good practice for us.

It is also a practice I try to carry into my day trying to remain mindful of the people around me. To appreciate someone is to recognize their inherent worth, their beauty, their unique giftedness. Appreciation builds people up and lets them know that you see them and value what they do. It can be as simple as looking someone in the eyes and saying, "Thank you." It can be a handwritten note, or it can be an intentional conversation.

At our recent women's retreat, one of our conversations was about seeing God in others. Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*, was our inspiration for the retreat. She writes: *"At its most basic level, the everyday practice of being with other people is the practice of loving the neighbor as the self. More intricately, it is the practice of coming face-to-face with another human being, preferably someone different enough to qualify as a capital 'O' Other – and at least entertaining the possibility that this is one of the faces of God."*¹

At the retreat, I shared a story written by my spiritual director, Dan Miller, who received the story from Sister Dolores McGuire...*In the town of Mill Valley in Northern California there lived an Irish poet. His name was Raymond. Many days he could be found conversing with friends or out-of-town visitors as they sat, stood, or simply strolled through the town plaza. One day Raymond, who regularly read his poems at the Bookstore Depot & Café on the plaza, told Sister Dolores of a one-word poem he had written and recently performed there. It is inspired by watching his grandson experience things for the first time. He began his one-word poem, he told her, by stepping around in front of the lectern and cupping his hands around the face of a woman in the front row. He looked directly into her face and said, "Wow!" He moved to the man next to her, cupped his face in his hands, "Wow!" he said to him. As he moved from person to person, right to left, down the front row of his audience, beholding each one's one and only face, repeating his poem and proclaiming to each the wonder of their being, he noticed that the people had begun an impromptu exchange of gazes and wows, staring into the face of one another and pronouncing the poem they had by now committed to memory: "Wow!" Suddenly a three-letter word—spawned by a grandchild's indigenous delight in the simplest of things—created an aura of ascending glee as a simple piece of performance art morphed into a communal sharing of mutual beholding and appreciation.*²

Cupping someone's face with your hands is probably not the best practice for greeting random strangers, but you can still think it. You can still say it to yourself. Instead of complaining, or judging, imagine saying, "Wow!" Every person is gifted. Every person has a story. Every person, regardless of how broken or flawed they may be, has a need and a longing to be seen and appreciated. We so often get caught up trying to fix people, or direct people, we miss the "WOW!"

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "An Altar in the World," p. 94

² Dan Miller – from a book he is working on, not yet published

Ten lepers, crying out to Jesus for compassion, might challenge our ability to say, “Wow!” Lepers were people with skin conditions that were feared to be contagious. Lepers were considered cursed, and they were quarantined away from their families and their livelihoods. They were untouchable and relegated to the margins. They are the people you don’t want to see, or hear, or even consider.

And yet, Jesus stopped to engage them. He appreciated their situation. He appreciated their worth. He beheld their humanity. It is the beginning of their healing.

He doesn’t wave his hand and say, “you’re healed!” He doesn’t touch them one by one. Instead, he simply tells them to go show themselves to the priests, and off they go! And as they go, they discover they have been healed. One of them stops in his tracks and does an about face. He starts shouting and praising God. He runs back to Jesus and falls at his feet, thanking him.

Jesus asks, “Where are the other nine?” Is he asking the crowd or is he asking the man laying at his feet? What did Jesus expect? He told them to go show themselves to the priests. Jesus makes note of the fact that the only one who turned back was the Samaritan in the group – the “foreigner.” Then he turns his attention the man at his feet. “Go on your way,” he says, “your faith has made you well.”

Jesus isn’t telling a story here. This is not technically a parable. But the encounter functions as a parable, leaving us with questions to ponder beyond the obvious gratitude of the healed Samaritan. We can save those questions for another day. On Thanksgiving Sunday, it is enough to celebrate the one who returned to show his appreciation. He completed the holy circuit. In that moment, he was fully aware of God. He was appreciated, and he returned to show his appreciation. We receive and we give.

After I got done chuckling, I replied to the email about our grievance group. I told him we didn’t have one. That’s not what we do here. That’s not who we are.

Our work is to appreciate. Appreciate God in others. Appreciate all the ingredients of our everyday lives. Appreciate the beauty around us. Appreciate that we need each other. Appreciate that life is precious – too precious to live in a constant state of irritation.

The 16th century reformer, Martin Luther, was once asked about the true nature of worship and he said, “The tenth leper turning back.” When we appreciate God around us and in others, it is an act of worship. We are constantly receiving, and taking time to appreciate all that we receive, completes the holy circuit. The light comes on, and we say to ourselves, “God is here!” in ways large and small.

We receive and we give.

At the end of each pew, there are notecards. I hope you will take one and think about someone who you appreciate. Write them a note or make a commitment to look them in the eyes and tell them. Or, if you prefer, write a note of appreciation to God.

Those other nine lepers were busy doing what they thought they were supposed to do...may we be the one who turns back. May appreciation become our daily touchstone.