

- A story is told about a wise old mission priest in Oklahoma, at a time when there had been a long drought. So his parish suggested to him that he offer a prayer service to ask for rain. On the appointed day, the old priest took his place and prayed for a variety of concerns. But *not once* did he ask God for rain! When the service was over, someone pulled him aside and said, "Father, you *never once* prayed for rain!" And the priest replied, "*and I notice that none of you brought your umbrellas!*"
- This story can help us appreciate an aspect of our Gospel reading. Ten lepers at the edge of a village call out to Jesus, who is *on his way toward Jerusalem*.¹ They say *what we would say*, when faced with a hopeless situation. The lepers stand at a distance because they are required to protect others from their *ritual 'un-cleanness'* and disease. With both hope and desperation, they cry out: "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*"
- Seeing them, Jesus simply says, "Go, and show yourselves to the priests!" Here we find the subtle part of the story, which connects with that prayer service in Oklahoma. The ten simply turn, and do what Jesus says. Why? Why do they do that? Just because he told them to? No ~ it's because *they accept and believe what Jesus says*.
- According to Mosaic Law, *only priests* could certify that someone was ritually clean, and free of disease.² The sole reason for the ten to show themselves to the priests, would be *to present evidence that they were healed!* Going to the priests would imply they believed their healing was *already happening*, if not complete. By turning to go, *all ten* showed that they believed *what Jesus' word* would accomplish. And Luke tells us that, *as they went, all ten were cleansed. All ten* were the kind of folks *who would have* come to that Oklahoma prayer service carrying an umbrella!
- *Imagine* being in their place. Surely, having been healed, *every one of them* was filled with *overwhelming joy!* (I have shared with you before James Christensen's painting, *Ten Lepers*, which captures the moment beautifully. I love how the artist portrays the

one who turns back.) Bubbling with excitement about what the priests' certification would mean for their lives, *they would have run to be reunited with their families* and former homes. *All ten would have been filled with thanks and praise for the great gift they had received.* We therefore *miss* the point of this story *if we think only one* of them, the Samaritan, was *thankful*.

- Listen to how Luke tells it: *"One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.* And he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, *giving him thanks."* By turning back, he humbly manifests a sign of repentance. Then, by falling down, he then embodies a sign of worship. So, this man *who turned back* wasn't just *thankful in general* about being healed. He came back to give *particular* thanks to the *source* of his healing. Luke leaves us to imagine his words, which must have been something like, "Praise you, O Lord, for your mighty work in my life!"
- Falling down at Jesus' feet was *an act of worship*. This is what we do when we bow in humility before God. It's how we acknowledge our unworthiness, giving thanks for undeserved grace and mercy. The Greek verb Luke uses to describe what this man does at Jesus' feet, is *"eucharisteo"*... In other words, he fell down in *"Eucharist"* at Jesus' feet ~ where he responds with *great thanksgiving!*
- No doubt, *all 10 were truly thankful*. But nine of them were focused *on the benefit* they had received - and the great change it brought to their lives. As Christensen's painting nicely shows, *only one thought about the particular source* of that grace-filled benefit. He is *the one who turned back to acknowledge* what he *received*, with thanks and praise. He turned back and publicly thanked Jesus. Those who did *not* return, *had already believed what Jesus was able to do*. But only one showed faith in *who Jesus was*. *Ten were thankful for the results; but only one turned back to praise God!*
- And so, Jesus asks, "Was *no one* found to return *and give praise to God* except this *foreigner?*"³ He then tells the man, "*Rise* and go your way; *your faith has made you well.*" *Ten believed, and were made 'clean.'* But only one responds with active *faith to a resurrection invitation, and he is made well*. All ten were

cleansed, and yet *only one* receives *a whole-person healing*. *Jesus then refers to him as saved.*⁴ We know this. For when we take care of our bodies, and benefit from modern medicine, we often experience *physical* healing. But *the healing of the whole person* comes –by grace– *through faith* in the *source* of all healing.

- This is *not* just a story about God granting a miracle to *some* people, *or* that *only one* was thankful for it. *This story provides a sign* - a sign of the Kingdom's arrival in Jesus. *And only one* of the ten *recognizes* it. Miracles can evoke *wonder* in those who encounter them. But –as we see *in the Scriptures*– encountering miracles *does not always bring redemptive insight and renewal*. *Because they are signs of the Kingdom, miracles need to be received with faith*. When received with faith, miracles inspire thanks, thanks to our God who gives new life.
- Being thankful for *good* things that happen is *common*, and a *natural* human experience. But *stopping to give thanks to the source* of all good things asks *more of us*. *This calls for worship!* We naturally praise the good that others do. *But like all real acts of love, praising God in worship for the good we receive involves a conscious choice*. This is why we are here this morning, and every Sunday morning. In the centuries-old words of the Prayer Book, “we have come together in the presence of Almighty God, ... to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, (and) to set forth his most worthy praise...”⁵
- Here is another subtle aspect of the story: *'A part gives thanks on behalf of the whole.'* One person gives thanks on behalf of the ten. When a part gives thanks on behalf of the whole, *the singular act of thanks* affirms God's *claim over the whole*. This is the principle at the heart of what we call “tithing” ~ the same pattern we find in the Old Testament. We see this when *God asks the farmer to present one tenth of the yield as a way to express thanks for the whole*.⁶
- This reminds me of the story about the missionary who went to a remote village located on a river. She began to doubt the efficacy of her ministry,

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especially her teaching about stewardship. Then one day, a little boy in the village came to her door. He presented her with a large fish, and said, “[here is my tithe!](#)” The missionary asked him, “but, where are the other nine?” The boy responded by saying, “[Oh, they're still in the river. I'm going to catch them now!](#)”

- We turn to the source of all our blessings with merely a fraction of what we receive. And, in the process, we acknowledge something important ~ that *whatever good we may have or receive* has only *one* source: the source is our great God, who is the giver of all good gifts. [So, with a part, we thank God for the whole.](#)



Ten Lepers ©James C Christensen. Courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop, Inc.

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. [He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him](#). And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made [clean](#)? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you [well](#)."

Notes

¹ That there were ten of them suggests the parallel with how that number of men constituted a quorum for a synagogue.

² See Leviticus, chapters 13-14.

³ The presentation of this rhetorical question clearly suggests a deficiency on the part of those who do or who do not respond to Jesus. How different this is from our modern and more utilitarian tendency to quantify efficacy in terms of a positively measurable response. According to these terms, Jesus fails to summon more than a 10% response here, and later does even worse in terms of his 12 disciples!

⁴ The greek word behind the English makes this clear.

⁵ From Morning Prayer I, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 41.

⁶ For example, see Jacob's vow to God, in gratitude, in Genesis 28:18-22, or God's command, in Leviticus 27:30-33.