

Gospel: Luke 17:11-19

As Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem,
he traveled through Samaria and Galilee.
As he was entering a village, ten lepers met him.
They stood at a distance from him and raised their voice, saying,
"Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!"
And when he saw them, he said,
"Go show yourselves to the priests."
As they were going they were cleansed.
And one of them, realizing he had been healed,
returned, glorifying God in a loud voice;
and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.
He was a Samaritan.
Jesus said in reply,
"Ten were cleansed, were they not?
Where are the other nine?
Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?"
Then he said to him, "Stand up and go;
your faith has saved you."

Homily: *Thank God for All His Love*

I suspect our Gospel today is a familiar one to many of us. In this month of November, the month of Thanksgiving, it's an appropriate Gospel for us to reflect on the many blessings that God has given within our own life. Let's take a deeper look at this story from Luke's Gospel. It begins by Luke recounting that Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. The journey to Jerusalem is always a journey to suffering, to death, and to resurrection. Jesus faces what the Father has asked Him to do, which is to be faithful in love. As Jesus is on His way to fulfill His destiny, He travels through the borders between Galilee and Samaria. You will recall that the Holy Land at that time is divided into three sections: the northern part, which is Galilee; a middle, Western section, which is Samaria; and then the southern section of Judah.

The Samaritans were considered heretics by the Jews and there wasn't any travel between the two. They would be rendered unclean by associating with these heretic people. But notice that at least one of the lepers that they encounter in this area is a Samaritan. We might just pause for a second to say, in the midst of suffering, so many of the social norms breakdown. Misery brings people together because, if you were afflicted with the disease of leprosy, you couldn't interact with everyday folks. The people would be rendered unclean if they had contact with a leper. The sources of the disease were unknown and part of that is simply a health description. We think of some of the epidemics within our own time, and when those are undiagnosed—or they don't know how to treat them—the norm is always one of fear and to keep those people at a distance. So it was in Jesus' time, and that was written into the Law: the lepers had to remain at a distance.

But, they are joined together, Jew and Samaritan alike, in their common suffering. It's not unlike the animal kingdom. If you recall the Disney story, *The Lion King*, when there is a drought,

animals that are natural enemies come together at the watering hole. In normal circumstances they would be at each other's throats but, because of the drought, they come together to find water. So it is for us humans. In the midst of our suffering, many of those norms that keep us apart can actually unite us in the suffering.

That's the case of these 10 lepers coming to Jesus. At a distance, keeping the Law, they shout out to Jesus, "Have mercy on us!" Jesus' reaction to them is immediate, "Go show yourselves to the priests." In the midst of that journey, they realize they are healed. Again, Jewish Law prescribed that a person who was afflicted with leprosy couldn't enter the Temple. It would be natural that the person who would be able to say 'Yes, you are healed,' or, 'No, you're not healed,' would be the priests because they're in charge of the Temple worship. During that journey all 10 of them eventually realize they're healed but one returns. That famous one returns to give thanks; realizing he was healed; opening his eyes to the reality of what God had done for him.

I think part of the importance of gratitude begins with simply our eyes being opened to be able to see the truth of our lives. When we focus too much on our problems, our eyes are closed. They're preoccupied with all of the struggles and the difficulties of what's going on. We give far too much weight to the problems that weigh us down. But when our eyes are opened in gratitude, we see even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances how God is blessing us, anointing us, loving us.

I've said often that one of the great tools that St. Ignatius Loyola recommended that we use every day is a daily Examen. It is to look over our lives and that daily Examen begins in gratitude. We begin by looking at our lives and seeing how God is blessing us, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Or, as I sometimes teasingly like to say, there's no day that's so bad that it can't get worse. So we look deeply into our lives, and see the blessings that God is bestowing.

Don't we take so many of our blessings for granted? We take our health for granted until we get sick and then we think, 'Oh, if I could only get healthy again then and all my problems would dissolve.' Then when we are healthy again we forget about what it was like to be sick and we just go about our normal business. Or we've got a few dollars in the bank and we're preoccupied with trying to get everything done and then we fall on financially hard times and we remember, 'Oh, when we had that money and we could pay our bills, how good were things?' But then things even out and then we go about being preoccupied.

There's always going to be problems in our life. There's never going to be a time in our life where we can say, 'Okay, all of my problems are fixed. It's just easy street for me.' There's always going to be a difficulty and if we have to wait for all of our problems to be solved before we say thanks, then we're never going to say thanks. But in the midst of every day, if we look and we say, 'How is the Lord blessing me right now?' There's always going to be something that we can find to give thanks for.

My friend Father Jim Willig, who died of cancer in the year 2001, had an extraordinary gift of time travel and he went back in time and he was able to interview those 10 lepers. And he just asked the nine who didn't give thanks why they didn't come back to give thanks and this is what they told him:

Number one: "Well, to tell you the truth, I was so excited to tell everybody else I forgot to return to Jesus to say thank you."

Leper number two: "No sooner was I cured from leprosy than my arthritis flared up. Let me tell you, it's one thing after another. I don't want to complain, but I still have an awful lot of pain."

Leper number three: "He knows how much I appreciate what he did, I don't need to tell him. Besides, I'm sure he hears it from a lot of other people."

Leper number four: "Frankly after all I've been through, I felt I deserved it. Don't you?"

Leper number 5: "He told us to go see the priests. I'm just doing what he told me."

Leper number six: "I don't know. I take it for granted that he was just doing his job."

Leper seven: "I thought about saying something to him, but to be honest with you, I didn't want to give him a big head."

Leper number eight: "To thank him or not to thank him...that is the question. I haven't decided yet."

And finally, leper number 9: "Hey, I just went along with most of what the others were doing. Why are you asking me? Ask them!"

There's always an excuse, isn't there? When we look deeply into our lives we can always find something to be grateful for. "The hunger that is in our world," said St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, "is not just a physical hunger. It's a deep, spiritual ache, and when we realize how much God has blessed us, is blessing us, and will continue to bless us, then we not only lift up a prayer of thanks, we reach out to others in need."

St. Mother Teresa once said: *The greatest disease in the West today is not leprosy or TB. It's being unwanted, unloved, uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are so many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread, but there are many more who are dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty than what I know in India. It's not only a poverty of loneliness, it's a poverty of spirituality. There's a hunger for love. There's a hunger for God.*

We're here today because God has touched our lives. Let's reach into that place of gratitude and share that love and that life and that grace with those in greater need.

Let me just conclude by sharing one of my favorite songs of gratitude. It was made famous in the musical *Godspell* and is actually based on Episcopalian hymn number 138: *We Plow the Fields*. The lyrics were originally from a German poem written by Matthias Claudius and it was translated into English by Jane Montgomery Campbell.

Fr. Michael Sparough Homily Transcript: Thank God for All His Love

We plow the fields and scatter,
the good seed on the land,
but it is fed and watered
by God's Almighty hand.

He sends us snow in winter,
the warmth to swell the grain,
the breezes in the sunshine,
and soft refreshing rain.

All good gifts around us
are sent from Heaven above.
So thank the Lord,
Oh thank the Lord,
for all His love.

We thank thee then Oh father
for all things bright and good;
the seed time and the harvest,
our life, our health, our food.

No gifts have we to offer
for all thy love and parts,
but that which thou desirous,
our humble thankful hearts.

All good gifts around us
are sent from Heaven above.
Oh thank the Lord,
Oh thank the Lord,
for all His love.

Amen. (Amen).