

**Luke 17:11-19**

"Look! A Presbyterian!"

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A few weeks ago as the last days of summer were slipping by, Heather and I were in our backyard playing with A.J. and Alex. We had set up a little inflatable swimming pool and they were busy dumping water on each other's heads (although it was more like A.J. dumping water on Alex's head). Evidently the water on the head made A.J. think of one Sunday before, when I had done a children's sermon about baptism and explained to A.J. in the car after church that Chuck had put water on his head the day he was baptized. As he lifted up a big cup of water and dumped it over Alex's head, he exclaimed, "Mommy, remember when I was a baby and Chuck put water on my head and made me a Baptist?"

Of course, I tried to explain to him that Chuck *baptized* him; he didn't make him a Baptist. I then explained that we are Presbyterians, but I'm not sure how much of that a three year-old mind can grasp. He's not likely to understand what it means to be Presbyterian, or what sets Presbyterians apart from other denominations, or why our church is unique and special compared to others. But you know, hopefully he is learning something about

God, and Jesus, and how we understand who they are. He knows a few blessings that we say before we eat, and sometimes at bedtime we will say our 'thank yous' to God for just about anything we can think of. So he definitely knows how to thank God. And actually, that's a pretty good start on understanding what it means to be Presbyterian.

When I read this story from Luke's gospel, I think about my two sons, A.J. and Alex, and how one of the very first things they learn to do in relation to God is be thankful. It's like that for many of us, I would imagine. When we hear this story, which is essentially about gratitude and thanksgiving, it reaches some part of us, some part of our faith, that has been there from the very beginning. It echoes the first prayers you ever learned to say, and the first words you ever learned to say to God: "Thank you". This story is about who we are as children of God; it's about who we are as Christians; and it's about who we are as Presbyterians as well.

At our core, we are thankful people. That one leper who gets healed by Jesus and decides to come back to offer his gratitude - well, there's something vaguely Presbyterian about him. Christians typically read this story focused on him, and we get kind of a warm,

fuzzy feeling inside when he turns around to thank Jesus, and then we sit back and ponder the importance of saying thanks to God every once in a while. But, as you might guess, there is far more to the story than just the thankful leper's gratitude.

As the story begins we read that Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, is passing through the region between Samaria and Galilee. That may just seem like Luke offering us some helpful geography, but as it turns out, it doesn't make much sense. Saying that Jesus was between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem is kind of like saying someone is between Virginia and North Carolina on their way to Orlando. Some Biblical scholars have called Luke geographically challenged because of stories like this, but it's more likely that Luke isn't talking about geography at all. Jesus is between Samaria, where all those wretched, sinful, unclean Samaritans live, and Galilee, a region that had been settled by Jews. Luke here isn't talking geography. He's shining a spotlight on the ages-old conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans. They didn't like each other very much, and in fact I think it's fair to say they hated each other. Most of us are familiar with this because of Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan.

When Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero of his parable, it draws anger from the Pharisees in the crowds because in their minds, they stand on the top rung of the ladder, closest to God, and the Samaritans are way down at the bottom.

In this story we've read this morning - wouldn't you know it - Jesus is at it again. He happens into this region between Samaria and Galilee and finds a colony of ten lepers. Back in those days leprosy was about the worst thing that you could get, and lepers had to live together far out in the wilderness where the healthy, clean people wouldn't have to look at them, or think about them, or come in contact with them. Lepers living out in a colony would often cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever someone came within earshot of them, so that any passersby could keep their distance. When Jesus comes near, however, they shout something different. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Jesus hears them and apparently does have mercy on them. He tells them simply to show themselves to the priests. The "priests" to which he sends them are, of course, the Jewish religious leaders, many of whom were Pharisees. As the lepers leave to find those priests, something incredible happens. They are made clean. They are healed. That's

when one of them, when he sees that he has been healed, turns back and praises God with a loud voice. He falls down at Jesus' feet and thanks him. Then Luke tells us in one short sentence, "And he was a Samaritan." You can almost hear the word *Samaritan* echo right off the page. Isn't that just like Jesus to make a Samaritan the hero? The other nine were presumably either mostly Jewish or all Jewish, since they were living just outside Galilee and they seem to know their way to the temple. We don't know what happened to them, but if they were mostly Jewish, or had at least some Pharisaic teaching in their history, they may have just believed that it wasn't Jesus who healed them at all. In fact, they may very well have been patting themselves on the back! After all, wasn't it their decision to go when Jesus told them to see the priests? They didn't have to go! They could have just stayed in the wilderness, but instead they decided to do what Jesus told them to. So really, shouldn't they get the credit for being healed? Why would they turn around and thank him? They healed themselves!

And then there's the Samaritan - you know, the Presbyterian one. He turned around to give thanks. He knew that even though he made the decision to follow Jesus' command, he didn't deserve

the credit for the healing. No, that was Jesus all the way. It may seem confusing that Jesus tells the man, “Your faith has made you well.” Clearly, Jesus isn’t talking about faith in the sense that this man made a decision, and in fact the man actually *disobeys* Jesus’ command to go and see the priests! And when Jesus says, “made you well,” he isn’t speaking about the healing event, for in fact Jesus heals a number of people (nine ungrateful lepers included) who seem not to have any lasting faith. No, Jesus here is speaking of the man’s gratitude, calling it “faith” and proclaiming that it has made him well – it has given him something that the other nine did not have. Perhaps now that he has been healed, he will be able to live a life centered on gratitude for what God has done for him. For him, “being well” means living in gratitude.

And that - gratitude - is a central piece of who we are as well. It lies at the core of what it means to be a Christian, and a Presbyterian. We Presbyterians hold to a God-centered theology. That sounds simple enough, but it's really more complicated than it sounds. All around us are different theologies, different understandings of who God is and who we are that aren't focused on God at all. Instead, they are focused on us, the human beings.

I'd go as far as to say that the predominant understanding among mainline Christians is that God has simply offered us blessing, and love, and salvation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but these things don't reach you unless you make the decision to accept them. Then, if you do the right things and behave yourselves, God will bless you and save you. This is the theology of the nine ungrateful lepers who march away thinking that there's no reason to go back and give thanks because they ultimately healed themselves. Presbyterians (and other Reformed denominations), however, see things a bit differently. We simply believe that God blesses and loves and saves whoever God wants to bless and love and save. All of that stuff is up to God, not us. And in fact, our job is really simple: we live every day out of an overwhelming sense of gratitude for God's amazing grace and love for all of us. We can't do anything to earn God's blessing and favor, because God has already given it in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The word of healing has already been given. We simply respond to what God has already done with love, and faith, and gratitude.

Of course, that's not always an easy thing to do, and we know that. We Presbyterians need to come together to remind ourselves of God's grace and encourage each other to give thanks for all that God has done. We proclaim the importance of showing gratitude to God not just with your words, but with your time, and your money, and your energy, and everything else you have. We are sent out into the world so that we can share the good news of God's grace with a world that all too often values self-determinism, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness above God's love for the world, and be living examples of gratitude.

A.J. is really good right now at saying thank you to God before every meal and at bedtime. Alex even is very good at saying "thank you" when you give him something, although it sounds more like "dat-too". But as they get older that will become more and more difficult to do. They'll come to rely on their own selves and their own decisions, and think less and less of what God has done. It happens to us all as we spend our lives in a culture that values the "self". But I hope that there will be times for them and for all of us when a scripture reading like this one reminds us for a brief moment that this life we live, and this thing inside each of us that

we call faith, is to be centered on gratitude. And once we hear that and remember what it's like to give thanks, maybe we'll see God's hand everywhere we look. Maybe we'll be drawn into a greater sense of thanksgiving for all that God has done. Christian author Anne Lamott is responsible for writing one of my favorite things ever; she wrote that she begins each day with one prayer: "Help me. Help me. Help me." and ends each day with another: "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Saying "thank you" to God lies at the heart of so much that we believe, and say, and do. It lies at the heart of church, where we gather to praise God for God's gracious love. It lies at the heart of the Christian funeral, where we give thanks to God for the gift of life given, and the blessing of God's never-ending claim on our lives. And yes, it lies at the heart of baptism, when someone at some point put water on your head and simply proclaimed who you are: a child of God, accepted and loved by God before you could act or respond to God in any way. In the Presbyterian church that's why we baptize babies - because it's not about what we can do but about what God has already done. And after you've been baptized,

everything else in your life from that moment forward is just giving thanks.

Thanks be to God, over and over and over again. Amen.