

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.'

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I Meant to Say Thanks...

Wrestling with Anne Lamott, Henri Nouwen and C.S. Lewis

Three heavy hitters teamed up on me this week, and I never really had a chance. No – I'm not talking baseball, although I admit, I have stayed up too late too often this past week, watching the Red Sox in the playoffs.

For me, in my world, the heavy hitters are writers I return to when I'm trying to sort through an issue, or sometimes the new writers I discover week by week. I gather books from my shelf, or articles from the web, and let them surround me during the week, let their words sink into my thought, and hopefully into my soul, working through the week's bible lessons.

This week three of my favorite authors – Anne Lamott, Henri Nouwen, and CS Lewis – kept circling around and around today's gospel story about the Ten Lepers Cured, and the One who gave God Thanks.

A new book by Anne Lamott is a small volume about the "*Three Essential Prayers*": "*Help, Thanks, Wow.*" I highly recommend it.

My other companions this week were C.S. Lewis, ascerbic, brilliant British novelist and theologian from last century, and his *Reflections on the Psalms*, and Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest and mystic, who taught at Yale and Harvard, and died about 15 years ago. This week I was re-reading segments of Nouwen's *Life of the Beloved*, written as a personal letter to a young Jewish reporter who showed up to interview him once in New Haven, and ended up being a longtime friend. It's about grasping somehow, *somehow*, that we *are* beloved by God -- a concept where hard to trust in our secular world, which constantly teaches us otherwise.

Three very slim books, full of powerful words about “thanks,” that kept dragging me into deeper reflections on gratitude.

Three heavy hitters, and *my* plans never really had a chance...

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I didn't mind focusing on thanks this week – it seemed reasonable enough. All of us have been taught by our parents to write thank you notes. We all feel good when we've been thanked for something we've done. And Thanksgiving is coming up next month, so this week we can get a jump start on being thankful. Fall *is* in the air...

Fine. A good, solid theme. Give God thanks.

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But the terrible trio of Lamott, Nouwen and CS Lewis were having none of my pabulum approach. They all relentlessly – and gently – kept focusing on what Jesus really was saying in today's story.

Giving God thanks isn't just a nice, good thing to do. It isn't just the polite thing, to comport with Miss Manners, or even our duty, under the Ten Commandments.

Giving thanks *radically changes our lives*. That's why we have to do it, if we're going to grow. It's a new way of life, the core to the deeper more spiritual life that we all – in some way - are here seeking today. If giving thanks isn't something we do over and over, time and again, if it isn't a way of seeing the world that gets woven into the fabric of our lives, then we've missed the whole boat. The Greek words in Luke's lesson convey that: Eucharisto – giving thanks – literally *saves* our life.

Because, all my authors said, when you give thanks to God, you fundamentally shift the focus away from just yourself, and you are brought, as the psalmist said today, into a “spacious place,” where you can get the broader perspective, where you can see distance, and horizon. It's like standing on the ocean side and looking out to a distance, knowing there is only vast water between you and the next continent.

When you give thanks, you've stopped long enough to see what life is really all about. That it *will* be all right, in the end. “That God, the giver of all good gifts, holds all of life in providential hands.”¹

And then, when you see what life is really all about, you return again and give more thanks.

¹ Kimberly Bracken Long, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, p. 166]

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But hold on. Isn't this getting a bit too carried away? After all, if I'd been a reporter hanging around in that land between Galilee and Samaria, covering this guy Jesus as he made his way towards Jerusalem, I never would have said the headline for the day was about thanks.

No. The headline clearly would have been: "Ten Lepers Cured" – a banner headline in fact! Because to be a leper was to be a complete pariah, an outcast from your family and friends, forced to beg and to wear loud clanging bells, so people knew in advance you were coming and could avoid you. That's why the ten lepers cried to Jesus from afar – they weren't allowed near, by the law. It was a horrible life.

When Jesus told the ten lepers to go and show themselves to the temple priests, all present knew that must mean they would pass muster as being clean, able to go into the temple again. Under Jewish law, a priest had to examine someone who was impure before you could be let back into society and into Jewish religious life. The priest would declare you fit, like a doctor at Ellis Island, examining skin for telltale rashes or blotches, deciding who is let in and who kept out.

But Jesus – very oddly – apparently considered the cleansing of the lepers to be mere prelude, the set up to the real story, his central lesson on giving God thanks. All ten of the lepers got cured, whether or not they gave thanks, so there was no quid pro quo. Being cured wasn't dependent on giving thanks.

Yet the story keeps driving us beyond the cure: and the one – the only one who returned and gave God thanks – *this* is the one who Jesus said was really delivered, saved, made fully well, deep in his soul, as well as in body.

For any of us who would give anything to have our bodies cured, or the bodies of a loved one healed, it's perplexing, maybe even infuriating, to have anyone imply that bodily health isn't enough. That health of the soul is also needed. Why can't Jesus get how desperately so many want and need a bodily cure?

But then, inside, we know what he meant, don't we?

The one who returned to give God thanks is the cornerstone of Jesus' lesson. Giving thanks to God makes all the difference.

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I'm not a good writer of thank you notes. I was taught to do it. My siblings do it, always, immediately, and beautifully. Their children all write thank you notes, too.

I always *mean* to send thank yous, but I don't always follow through. Or they're very delayed.

Why do I have trouble giving thanks? My writer triumvirate – of Nouwen, Lamott and CS Lewis – seemed to think this an issue worthy of examination for me. Perhaps it is for you, too., at least from time to time. What's so hard about living with gratitude at the core of my life, and saying so?

The biggest reason? I always feel so busy! Rather than stop to give thanks for something that has already occurred, I tend to quickly rush on to what lies ahead and needs still to be done. It's like the nine lepers, rushing on to the priests, to be certified "okay". What they were doing wasn't wrong - Jesus had told them to go, after all. But they were so intent on that mission that they didn't want to stop, to pause, to return, to give thanks.

Deep down, I want to be certified "okay" too, to check more things off my list, to be on top of things. I want my family and friends and you to think I'm on top of things; and it takes a lot of time to seem on top of things... My craving to do and do and do prevents me just stopping – stopping – and saying thank you.

Anne Lamott explains: "We are too often distracted by the need to burnish our surfaces, to look good so that other people won't know what screwed up messes we are, our mate or kids or finances, are."

Henri Nouwen agrees: "The problem of modern living is that we are too busy – looking for affirmation in the wrong places? – to notice that we are being blessed....It has become extremely difficult for us to stop, listen, pay attention and receive gracefully what is offered to us. ..."

Does this have any resonance with you?

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But that's not all. Perhaps I have a lingering hesitation, as if giving thanks to God, or to other people, signifies that I can't claim credit *myself* for an accomplishment, a fear that when I give *God* thanks, then my own hard work, effort and insight are rendered immaterial. It's as if there is a zero sum game, with us competing against God or others. If anyone else – even God -- gets thanked, there's less applause for me. Maybe we've assumed – or been told in some other church - that to claim our piece of the credit to bolster the crabbed, small sense of self with which we all wake some mornings, is a sin.

But friends, God doesn't compete with us; God partners with us. I'm convinced that God thanks *us* for the gifts and contributions we bring to projects and people, to the caring of this world. God treasures our talents and rejoices when we use them for

good. God's greatest delight is partnering with us, that the world might be better loved: we thanking God, God thanking us,

No competition. No diminishment of us or God needed. No zero sum.

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But perhaps most difficult of all, there are stretches in our life when we genuinely *can't see* much, if anything at all, to be thankful for. It's easy – or at least easier - to be grateful when everything's going well, when leprosy has vanished – but those times are hideously sparse in some seasons.

Anne Lamott says:

I admit, sometimes this position of gratitude can be a bit of a stretch. So many bad things happen in each of our lives. Who knew?

When my son, Sam, was seven and discovered that he and I would probably not die at exactly the same moment, he began to weep and said, "If I had known that, I wouldn't have agreed to be born."

This one truth, that the few people you adore will die, is plenty difficult to absorb. But on top of it, someone's brakes fail, or someone pulls the trigger or snatches the kid, or someone deeply trusted succumbs to temptation, and everything falls apart. We are hurt beyond any reasonable chance of healing. We are haunted by our failures and mortality....(50-51)

But, says Lamott,

the world keeps on spinning, and in our grief, rage and fear a few people keep on loving us and showing up....In the face of everything, we slowly come through....We come to know - or reconnect with – something rich and okay about ourselves. And at some point, we cast our eyes to the beautiful skies, above all the crap we're wallowing in, and we whisper, "Thank you." (51)

...We and life are spectacularly flawed and complex. Often we do not get our way, which I hate, hate, hate. But in my saner moments I remember that if we did, usually we would shortchange ourselves...(45)

Domestic pain can be searing and it is usually what does us in. It's almost indigestible: death, divorce, old age, drugs: brain-damaged children, violence, senility, unfaithfulness. Good luck with figuring it out. It unfolds, and you experience it, and it is so horrible and endless that you could almost give up a dozen times. *But* grace can be the experience of a second wind,

when even though what you want is clarity and resolution, what you get is stamina and poignancy and the strength to hang on.....(47)

....Or you look at what was revealed in the latest mess, and you say thanks for the revelation, because it shows you some truth you needed to know, and that can be so rare in our families, let alone in our culture, our world, and in our marriages, and in our relationships with our teenagers and with ourselves.

You say, Thank you for lifting this corner of the curtain so I can see the truth, maybe for just a moment, but in a way that might change my life forever. (49)

"If you've been around for a while," Lamott says, "you know that much of the time, if you are patient and are paying attention, you will see that God will restore what the locusts have taken away...."(50)

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My terrific three theologians try to teach me: give thanks to God at all times, or at least when you can, after the horrific times have passed, because, they say, the payoff is astonishing.

Nouwen and Lamott insist that the practice of gratitude, over time, changes us. Giving thanks "becomes a habit," if we're lucky. (Lamott, 49) And when this "huge mind shift" comes, in the way we live, when we feel quietly and humbly and amazingly blessed, when "you breathe in gratitude and breathe it out, too," (60) then "saying and meaning 'Thanks' leads to a crazy thought: What more can I give?" (62).

Henri Nouwen teaches that regardless of our often volatile emotions – the elation we feel one day and the despair into which we fall the next – if we nonetheless, for half an hour each day wait for God in silence and in thanks, then a powerful, strong and deep movement begins within us, revealing how blessed we are, and giving us the power to bless others. To thank them.

CS Lewis notices that "the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds," praise God most, giving thanks, and "the cranks, misfits, and malcontents" thank least. (80) To give thanks, says Lewis, "almost seems to be inner health made audible." (80)

Why thank God? CS Lewis suggests thinking of an admirable piece of art. If we don't admire it, *we* shall be "stupid, insensible, and great losers – we shall have missed something" (78). When we admire or appreciate God, says Lewis, we are simply awake; "*not* to appreciate is have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost it all." (79)

By giving thanks as a way of life, for what we have, what we've been given, God brings us out into a "spacious place" within our own lives, and we move from fretting about how little we've been able to do, or how hard life is, to trusting, somewhere deep in our gut, that God will help us pull through this hardship, too.

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You may already enter each day with thanksgiving, and end each with praise to God for all that you've received. If that is true, then you are the one whom Jesus holds up for us today, most deeply healed. But if you're among the other 9, at least sometimes – too busy to give God thanks; convinced that we humans can handle ourselves just fine; or grieving under the burdens of a life for which little now can elicit thanks -- then know you are not alone. You're with the 90%. And together, we here today can journey towards being the people of gratitude. By thanking others. By being with one another during troubled times, and sometime down the road, being the ones thanked.

Our prayerbook does this already, ensuring that we do give God great thanks, Sunday by Sunday. It's what all the chants are about and much of our Morning Prayer service: praising God, giving God thanks.

Now, can you do so on your own, when you leave this place, breathing in and out gratitude? Can I?

I want to. Because I see now, more clearly - again - how deep my joy can be, grounded in a perspective of thankfulness, trusting in God's love, assured that nothing can ever separate us from that. It will be all right in the end.

Where we have been lost or lonely, we are found along the road, like the lepers. When we ask for help, calling out even from a distance, we will be heard and answered. For all that, I begin afresh to give God great thanks.

Day by day. Breath by breath. And our lives will be transformed. It's the promise.

Amen.