

Jesus and his disciples were somewhere between Galilee and Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. Crowds were gathering because they'd heard news of 5000 people being fed and the sick being healed and the dead being raised. They were pressing in on Jesus, when suddenly they grew still, and an uneasy silence rippled across the sea of people. An unwelcome noise had begun to build...Bells tinkling, and weak voices calling out "unclean! Unclean," ..."Master, have mercy on us!"

Leprosy has terrified humanity since ancient times. Lepers couldn't hide their disease – it was visible on their faces, on their bodies. They were driven from their homes and forced to live outside of the towns and villages.

The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp. Leviticus 13: 45-56

Jesus looked at them, these 10 lepers standing at a distance and calling, and he saw what anyone could see, that these 10 men needed all the mercy they could get. He did not touch them in this case - there was no mud, no spittle, no talk of faith – just an order: "Go and show yourselves to the priests." and so they did, disappearing as obediently as they had appeared in the first place.

The crowd had hoped to see something astounding, but at first, it seemed, that the whole incident passed with nothing. But what the crowd didn't see was what was happening just a few yards behind them. The lepers had stopped on their way to the temple, staring in shock and joy at one another's faces and hands – the scars and open sores were gone! Their skin was a healthy brown, not a mark in sight! But Jesus had told them to go to see the rabbi. *It was the rabbi's role to offer a diagnosis – a verdict – clean or unclean, welcomed home or left an outcast.* So, at a dead run, they tore off toward the synagogue

Actually, only nine went, one did not do as he was told. Rather, when he noticed, when he saw that he was healed, he turned back instead. The crowd recognized him as a Samaritan – he was a double outsider – an outsider by virtue of his leprosy – and by virtue of his non-Jewish blood - a double loser who had turned back and was now lying at the feet of Jesus and thanking God. Jesus looked at him and wondered aloud, where the other nine were and why only this man, this foreigner, turned back to say thank you? "Rise and go your way, Jesus said, your faith has made you well." Or straight from the greek, your faith has saved you.

Ten were healed day, of their leprosy, but only one was saved. Ten set out for Jerusalem to claim their free gifts as they were told, but only one turned back and gave himself to the Giver instead. Ten behaved like obedient followers, only one behaved like a man in love. (Barbara Brown Taylor)

The great reformer, Martin Luther, once was asked to define worship – he said worship is the "10th leper moment", worship is not obligation, but the return of a thankful heart to the source of its healing. Worship is the return of a thankful heart to the source of it's healing.

The invitation given to each one of us this morning – is two fold – one – to remember that all of our life is meant to be worship. And two – to consider how gratitude might just be the heartbeat of the regular living of our lives.

One person once wrote that a human being's truest prayer, the first real gift we have to offer to God, is thanksgiving. God is the giver and we are the thanksgivers. (Don Postema)

The kind of gratitude that I'm wondering about today is more than just good manners – more than saying thank you for the stuff of my life – loving relationships, breath, clean air to breathe and a beautiful creation to soak in - although that's really important. In a culture of entitlement, privilege, and hurry, I know that I can simply forget to say thank you, to be grateful – it's so easy to believe I deserve this or I've worked hard for the stuff of my life. It's so easy to take each moment for granted.

But more than this – what captured my heart in all of my study and preparation for today was the 10th leper. According to Leviticus, a priest needed first to pronounce a healed leper clean before he or she can be received back into society. Everyone knew this and so those 9 lepers ran to complete the miracle. The Samaritan leper would have known this too - but something helped him to pause, to be fully grounded in that extraordinary moment, and really notice what had just happened to him and by whose hand the gift had come. There was nothing more to reach for or to strain for. So great was the gratitude that rose up inside of him that it turned him around, changed his direction and led him straight back to Jesus. He refused to be separated from what gave him life.

Maybe living lives of gratitude isn't all about the gifts given to us—it's not about the food, shelter, the abundance itself, maybe we're called to live as grateful people because of the very heart of the One – who made us, who wants to make us whole, who chooses to welcome us home – who has the power to free us, save us and make us live.

We know that we go through dark times, we know that we live through tragedy and sorrow, violence, hunger, homeless and loneliness. We know that sometimes it's very hard to give thanks or to see the gifts of God in our lives. We know the world is not the way we want it to be – that God longs for it to be and that we're often a big part of the problem.

And we also know that when we gather around this table to eat this bread and drink this cup – it's because Jesus suffered a violent death on an instrument of torture after spending a long lonely night in Gethsemane wishing it could have been different.

The world is filled with reasons to be hopeless and resentful, rather than grateful. But deeper than sorrow beats the unbroken pulse of God's joy – a joy that says – there is no greater love than this – that I have laid down my life for you – I've shown you that through the darkness and the times of hell – is hope, is resurrection – is me – loving you – you are never alone.

Our junk, our sin – can't scare God away - our open sores on the outside of our bodies or the festering ones on the inside – can't make God give up on us. God longs to heal us and loves completely.

And the practice of learning to notice that love, to receive it, take it into ourselves – and offer it to others - is the life long practice of learning true gratitude.

Words of Institution

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Bruxy Cavey – in a sermon on the cross of Christ – said – “it’s interesting that our first act of dis-trust, of walking away from God was eating. We believed the lie of scarcity – that somehow God was holding out on us – Adam and Eve ate the one thing that God had asked them not to eat. And the world changed – they left home.

It’s appropriate, he said, that eating becomes one of the ways we find our way back again – coming as we are, to our Lord’s table – is a practice that declares I am growing, more and more God, to notice you, to thank you, to trust you, and come home to you.

Even knowing that we screw up, that we struggle to notice God, that we forget to say thank you...we are welcome. Even knowing what Judas would do, Jesus did not bar him from the table. He set a place for him, he ate out of the same dish with him. Judas was included, until he excluded himself. And yet, Jesus still preemptively offers him forgiveness.

God’s promise before time, spills out in this meal. In Jesus – the one who stopped to give new life to the outcast, in Jesus – the one who loved and played with children, in Jesus – the one who wept tears of sorrow that the cross could not be avoided – in Jesus life, and in his death on the cross - in his resurrection – we are welcomed.

There is joy to come, no matter how dark your night. There is forgiveness already offered, no matter how often you turn away – there is an invitation that never stops – meet me here - eat this bread – drink this cup, let my life become yours. One author writes beautifully – when we eat and when we drink together – the body and blood of our Lord Jesus – God rides our bloodstreams straight to our hearts where the everlasting covenant is written - I will be your God and you will be my people. Thanks be to God. It is the 10th leper moment