

Pentecost XVIII – Proper 23C

October 12, 2025

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

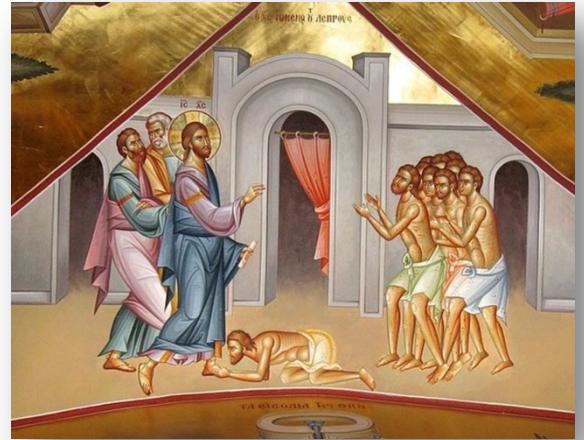
Psalms 66:1-11

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

Gratitude Unleashed

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*



Can you imagine what it must have been like to have to live in the shadows because of being diseased, disfigured and considered to be unclean... to live believing that your affliction is a punishment from God? The depth of such pain and humiliation cannot be fathomed. In the ancient world, lepers were not to come within 50 yards of anyone... no closer than half the length of a football field. Lepers wore bells like cats. If anyone came near, they would need to announce their presence by shouting “Unclean! Unclean!” Their affliction permeated every corner of a leper’s life. Instructions for diagnosing skin disease, as well as purity laws concerning leprosy, can be found in the 13th chapter of Leviticus:

“Any person with a serious skin disease must wear torn clothes, leave his hair loose and unbrushed, cover his upper lip, and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as anyone has the sores, that one continues to be ritually unclean. That person must live alone; he or she must live outside the camp.”¹

The chapter concludes with a string of verses about “the Law Concerning Leprous Garments.” In the ancient world, many skin ailments were classified as leprosy. Clearly, such a leprosy plague was a very present scourge in the ancient world.

On his journey towards Jerusalem, in the borderland between Samaria and Galilee, Jesus encounters ten lepers who were bone weary from living a marginal existence in the shadows of society. They were tired of being shunned in a land in which their validity, their citizenship, and their very humanity... were essentially marked “VOID!”

News that the itinerant teacher was near must have reached the ten lepers. When they spotted Jesus, rather than telling him to stay away, the ten lepers called out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Jesus offers no kind or comforting words... no healing touch... no blessing. Jesus simply instructs the ten to go to the priests for a certificate of cleanliness that would be proof that they no longer had leprosy. Such a certificate would be their passport back into the world of the living.

¹ *The Message*, Leviticus 18:45-46

Offering no comforting words, no healing touch, no blessing... Jesus gives the instruction for the men to go find a priest. Even before the lepers were healed, the ten obey and head out in search of a priest. This was a risky moment for the ten because... had they shown themselves to the priests while having active leprosy... they would have violated the laws of separation demanded of the plagued, putting their very lives at risk. As they headed out... it probably wasn't long before the men began feeling some strange sensations in their bodies, maybe some tingling in their toes and in their fingertips. Pulling up their sleeves, they would have noticed their skin clearing up as they stretched out their fingers in the light of day. I can imagine their strength beginning to return... and hoods falling backwards... as long hidden faces turn skyward to soak up the warmth of the sun... for the first time in many years. Though they couldn't see their own faces, they could look at their companions and see that the leprosy was gone. All ten had been made clean. All that was needed now... was to show themselves to the priests to obtain an official certification that they were clean, a certification that would allow them to cross back into the land of the living.

The healing of the ten is not merely a story of physical healing. It is also an account of social healing... a healing in which a great social stigma was removed and the gift freedom is restored. The story could have ended right there... but it doesn't. A profound, relief-filled, life-changing moment was experienced by all ten... but only one of the ten broke rank and returned to Jesus. With a heart full of gratitude and praise, the tenth leper ran back and fell down at Jesus' feet giving, as it says in the Greek: "eucharisto." The tenth leper gave thanks. We don't know the nationality of the other nine, but we are given a bit of a zinger at the end of this story when we are told that the tenth leper was a Samaritan... a foreigner... a major outsider... a member of a group that was on the receiving end of deep ancestral hate. The one who returned knew the experience of compounded ostracism. He had been both a diseased, outcast leper.... and a despised foreigner. The tenth leper had nothing to gain by showing himself to the priests. With nowhere to go, and nothing left to lose, he returns to Jesus and gives thanks. According to Debbie Thomas, the tenth leper "...sees that his identity – his truest place of belonging – lies at Jesus' feet. He sees that Jesus' arms, alone, are wide enough to embrace all of who he is – leper, foreigner, outcast... "other."²

Jesus wants to know what happened to the other nine who were healed and who did not return. Jesus wonders: Why were the others not compelled to return and give thanks like the tenth leper, the foreigner? What did the tenth leper know that the others did not? Was it the multiple levels of suffering he knew for being an underclass, outcast foreigner... as well as a leper... that helped him recognize the generous gift of healing? This story is far more than a simple message about gratitude. The story invites us to explore our own inner landscapes of vulnerability, pain, and feelings of unworthiness. It is from these deep places that the "shoulds" and "oughts" about how and when to give thanks fall away. It is from the very depths of our basic human experiences that true praise and worship rise up and come to life.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, in the early 16th century, Martin Luther was asked to describe the nature of true worship. His answer was simple: true worship is "the tenth leper turning back." Worship is the event... the gathering... the meeting place between worlds where the faithful return to the one who is the source of well-being and fullness of life. The faithful return in

² Debbie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2395-a-foreigner-s-praise>

gratitude, with praise and prayer, silence and sacraments. True worship is about far more than mere obligation. Worship is about the whole of a blessed and tattered people who seek to be together with one another and with in God... A people seeking the communal knowledge of God's presence in the fullness of worship and thanksgiving. A worshipful place is one that makes room for tears of sadness as well as tears of joy. I am always saddened to hear that someone has stayed away from church because they were struggling and not feeling put together enough to come to church... or that they were staying away because it felt as though their faith was running on fumes. And yet... Jesus continues longing for the lost and the broken... the forgiven and the blessed... to gather together in his name. With open arms, Jesus welcomes us all, no matter our condition. I have often repeated these words of Brené Brown that say it well:

"I went back to church thinking that it would be like an epidural, like it would take the pain away... that church would make the pain go away. Faith and church was not an epidural for me at all; it was like a midwife who just stood next to me saying, 'Push. It's supposed to hurt a little bit.'"

Beyond pain there is joy. When we are gathered together in Jesus' name... there is true worship and an ever-present invitation to healing and new life. In true worship, love and gratitude are woven together in praise.

The tenth leper shows us what it means to understand God's love deeply... and, as well, he shows us how to respond in love. But what about the other nine? What keeps them... or rather... what keeps *us* from expressing deep gratitude? Could it be that...

- ...we don't recognize the many gifts we have been given?
- ...or, that we don't think we deserve the gifts we have been given?
- ...or, that we simply forget to think about the many gifts we have been given?
- ...or, that we don't know how to offer gratitude in deep ways?

Research on the "Science of Gratitude"³ tells us that a full 90% of Americans think that gratitude is important, but only 52% of women and 44% of men express their gratitude on a regular basis. The statistics are a bit higher for religious folk, with 65% expressing gratitude regularly. It is important to note that there is a difference between feeling gratitude and expressing gratitude. Learning to express gratitude freely has great power. The numbers simply tell us... that in our culture there is a lot of room for growth in developing holy habits of expressing gratitude. Other studies have shown that, in patients with a form of heart failure, higher levels of measured gratitude "were associated with better mood, higher quality of sleep and less inflammation" with a conclusion that "...a more grateful heart is indeed a more healthy heart."⁴

Only one of the ten returns to Jesus to say, "Thank you." Only one of the ten experiences the full joy of worshiping at Jesus' feet. Only one of the ten knows a deeper level of blessing, salvation, and restoration through a deeply felt expression of gratitude.

³ Templeton Foundation <https://www.templeton.org/discoveries/science-of-gratitude>

⁴ Paul J. Mills, "A Grateful Heart is a Healthier Heart," American Psychological Association, 2015, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2015/04/grateful-heart>

The tenth leper knew the experience of “gratitude spilling over into love.”⁵ May we, too, grow both in our feelings of gratitude and in our ability to express gratitude in response to Christ’s call to healing and wholeness.

As we kick-off the annual pledge appeal campaign this day, following a stewardship message from one among you, your parish leadership is going to express their gratitude by being the first to submit pledge promises for the coming year. This is the time for all of us prayerfully to consider how we will offer our heart-felt “thank yous” for all we have known in this place... in the many opportunities to worship, learn, and serve... and for the gifts of fellowship and community we know here at St. Barnabas. I am thankful for the good work of the stewardship team, the many ministry teams of St. Barnabas, its leadership and fabulous staff... for all who support our life in Christ in this place... and that includes you.

I would like to end with a prayer by J. Philip Newell, from his book *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, that I believe describes well the blessings we know here at St. Barnabas where we are nourished and strengthened to be Christ’s hands, heart, and voice in the world:

*It is not just the interior of these walls,
it is our own inner beings you have renewed.
We are your temple not made with hands.
We are your body.
If every wall should crumble,
and every church decay, we are your habitation.
Nearer are you than breathing,
closer than hands and feet,
ours are the eyes with which you, in the mystery,
look out in compassion on the world.
So we bless you for this place,
for your directing of us,
Your redeeming of us, and your indwelling.
Take us ‘outside the camp’, Lord,
outside holiness,
out to where soldiers gamble and thieves curse,
and nations clash at the cross-roads of the world...
so shall this building continue to be justified.⁶*

Amen...

⁵ Thomas, op.cit.

⁶ From J. Philip Newell’s *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, pg. 82.