

Stewardship: “Thank you, Thank You, Thank You!”

Sunday, October 10, 2010: Luke 17:11-19

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One of my favorite authors writing about the intersection of faith and life is Anne Lamott. In her book *Traveling Mercies* Anne writes, “here are the two best prayers I know: “Help me, help me, help me” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

When words fail us in our prayers, these two short and repetitive set of phrases are a good default mode. They essentially sum up what constitutes a good prayer life.

In today’s Gospel story about the healing of the ten lepers it appears that the ten have read some of Anne Lamott as well. Apparently all knew the “help me, help me, help me” prayer, but nine totally forgot the “thank you, thank you, thank you” one after they were cured by Jesus. Maybe they just hadn’t finished the book.

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” they cry out as they approach Jesus. This is the, “help me, help me, help me” prayer. How often has pretty much all of humanity – including all those atheists prolifically writing books these days - prayed the help me prayer?

And Jesus responds to their cry for help. “Go and show yourselves to the priests” he tells the ten lepers. As they went off to do so, “they were made clean.” In other words they were cured of their leprosy. But only one turns back and approaches Jesus to offer the “thank you, thank you, thank you” prayer. We are told, “When he saw that he was healed, [he] turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.”

This story evokes a strong response in us. We think, “Just what appallingly bad manners those nine had not saying thank-you. Their mothers would be horrified!” But the reality is those nine are doing exactly what Jesus told them to do; they are heading off to find a priest to certify their cleanliness. As Jews, the nine would have been profoundly aware that the Law required this priestly certification of cure before they could resume their lives as full participants in the Jewish community. They were so eager for that restoration after their isolating illness that they did not bother to say, “thank you, thank you, thank you.”

The behavior of the nine ends up being perfunctory. Like much of the religious behavior that Jesus was so critical of the nine lepers may have followed the letter of the law, but their behavior failed to live into its spirit, which is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. For what better way is there to follow the law than by offering thanks to God for the blessings we receive?

The tenth healed leper is different from the nine in many ways. In addition to his unique behavior in proffering thanks he is also a Samaritan, a foreigner, a non-Jew. His status amongst the Jews of that time would have been commensurate to the disgraceful way many Americans view illegal Mexican aliens or Muslims in our society today. He was a vilified outsider.

Once he was healed of his leprosy, the Samaritan would have been equally as eager as the Jewish lepers to return to his home village and be restored to the full life of his community. But he remembers to offer the “thank you, thank you, thank you” prayer to Jesus first.

Why did he, but not the nine do so?

The answer lies within the two different terms used to describe what occurs in the healing story. When Jesus tells the lepers to go show themselves to the priests – and he said this to all ten despite it not being a requirement of the Samaritan – we are told that they are, “made clean.” In Greek “to be made clean” means physical cure; so all ten are physically cured of their leprosy.

But we are told the tenth realized that he was not only made clean, he also “saw that he was healed.” In Greek the term for “to be healed” means to “be made whole.” To be made whole goes beyond physical cure, it is to be healed spiritually in body, mind and spirit. Realizing this whole healing of himself the Samaritan turns back toward Jesus to offer his gratitude.

And this is the hinge of the story; the two different responses are all about grace. Grace is what happens to us when we recognize and say thank, you, thank you, thank you for the abundant, unearned, undeserved love that God gives each one of us.

Only the Samaritan ends up being grateful for the grace of God inherent in his whole healing. In acknowledging the miracle of what Jesus has done for him the tenth leper acknowledges the abundant grace in that moment. The other nine missed the grace

because they were busy rushing off to perfunctorily perform the minimum requirements of their faith. It's not that God didn't convey grace to them, it's that they were too busy to apprehend what a gift grace is. Or maybe they didn't care.

To state it more precisely; for the Samaritan his response was all about his relationship to God; it was all about Jesus and accepting the grace that flows through him. Ultimately the response of the other nine was all about themselves.

We kick-off our annual stewardship campaign today. Over the next several weeks various appeals will be made for you to consider the levels at which you give of your time, talent and treasure to this parish. You will hear various lay people give short testimonies about why they give generously, even sacrificially of themselves to this church.

You will receive a packet with pie charts describing where our income comes from and how it is spent. The chair of the stewardship committee will write you a well-reasoned letter urging you to discern how you give. You will also receive a copy to this stewardship sermon just in case you missed today.

All our appeals will work to balance talk of giving money with the giving of your time and talent. But with significant red ink in our operating budget we can profess that stewardship is as much about time and talent as it is about treasure till the cows come home, but as the old saying goes, that would be Whistling Dixie.

It's not that we don't need to have more people giving generously of their time and talent to sustain the ministries of this congregation. We do! But the reality is if we don't have the money – if we don't seriously continue to eradicate the red ink in the budget - our ministries and everything else anything will not continue. The need for money and to balance the budget is critical in our stewardship appeal to you.

Now how much money we give is going to depend on how we respond to Jesus' gifts to us. We all have a choice. Are we going to be one of the nine lepers and do the perfunctory, bare minimum of responding to God, (and that is what stewardship is all about, responding to God) so we can just barely maintain our faith connection? Or will we be like the one leper and respond with enthusiasm and gratitude; with a big thank you, thank you, thank you prayer for God's blessings to us?

The first choice indicates your relationship to God is really all about yourself. The second choice says that it is all about Jesus.

Like the nine lepers many Christians look to God and the Church and readily say, help me, help me, help me when the need arises. Help me when I am down, sick, or in trouble. Help me teach my kids our faith tradition; help me be the person God wants me to be, help me be comforted and inspired by good sermons. Help me when I need my child baptized, my son married, my parent buried. Help me satisfy my curiosity about religion, help me answer life's big questions, help me when I am in jail, in the hospital, or getting divorced. Help me by providing inspiring worship, glorious music, a beautiful, well-maintained building. Help me think that there is some good in a chaotic world by doing good works on my behalf so that I may feel good.

But like the nine lepers, people who ask for the church's help but only want to offer a minimal and perfunctory giving back of themselves to God are missing the point of a faith life. The German Christian pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer called that kind of expectation cheap grace, which is to say it's no grace at all.

Instead Christians are called to emulate the leper who said "thank you, thank you, thank you" in response to all that God and God's Church does for them. People of faith are called to respond to the Church being there when they plead the help me prayer by giving back with the thank you prayer. Christians are called to say thank you to God by giving generously, and yes even sacrificially of themselves, so that the church may continue to respond when they and the world pray, help me.

My brothers and sisters in Christ; our stewardship decisions must always be all about Jesus and our relationship with him, otherwise they are really about nothing at all.

Amen.