

Pilgrim Church

July 15, 1979

Dorothy B. Belt

Luke 17:11-19

The following story is one which I heard at Hartford Seminary 30 years ago and which I wrote down in November, 1952 for use here at a meeting of what was then group 2.

Caleb lived with his family - his wife and two children - in a little house in Galilee near the border of Samaria. Caleb was a workman who enjoyed his work and his family. They were happy together even though they were far from rich.

One day tragedy struck Caleb and his family. He discovered that somehow he had caught the most dreaded disease of his day - leprosy. This meant that he would have to say good-by to his wife and children, to his work and all his past life and go to live as an outcast with the other lepers. This also meant his family would be without the money he had been earning at his work and would have to depend on the goodness of their neighbors.

Very sadly Caleb said good-by to his family and friends and left them to go and live on the edge of the village. There were seven other lepers living there, and after a while they were joined by two more so that there were ten. They depended for their food on what they could get from begging, whatever kind people would throw their way. Without any medical care, their disease got continually worse. For Caleb, worse than his own unhappy lot was the worry about his wife and children and his longing to be with them and to work for them.

One day a kindly passer-by told the ten men about someone who had been healing such as they and giving sight to the blind and making the lame to walk. "His name is Jesus. He, too, is a Galilean like most of you. I hear he will be going through the village in a few days on his way to Jerusalem."

Every day after that the ten lepers went early every morning as close as they dared to the road that ran through the village. They called to the few seemingly friendly passers-by to ask of news of this Jesus. Some had heard of him, but none knew when he was coming.

Then one day they saw a group of foot-travelers coming toward the village. They seemed to be talking together as they came and one of them seemed to be listened to by the others with particular attention.

"That must be Jesus!" shouted Caleb. At the sound of his voice the group of travelers stopped and turned toward the field where the lepers were standing.

At that the ten lepers all began to shout together: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Jesus answered them and said: "Go, show yourselves to the priests as is the law."

The lepers ran on ahead to go to Jerusalem and the priests. As they went, one of them, who was from Samaria looked at himself and saw that he was already well again. He stopped, but the others were too much in a hurry to notice. He turned back toward Jesus and his friends and ran to Jesus and fell at his feet and thanked him. Jesus asked, without expecting an answer, "Weren't there ten of you? Where are the other nine? Only you have given praise to God. Rise and go on your way."



The man rose and went after the others. When they went to the priest he could find no sign of leprosy on them and sent them home.

All Caleb could think of was the joy of returning to his family and how he could now work for them again. As he came near to his home for the first time in two years one of his children saw him coming and ran in to tell the others. They came outside to look, thinking the boy must be mistaken, but it was indeed Caleb.

When he came close enough to be heard, he called to them: "Have no fear! I am well. I have come home to you."

It was a happy family reunion and Caleb told of the hardship of the two years and asked about them and how they had gotten along without him. He told of hearing about Jesus and then of seeing him and of being healed. He told of their journey to Jerusalem to show themselves to the priests and of their joyful return to the village.

"God be praised," said his wife. "Did you thank God and this Jesus who healed you, Caleb?"

Caleb hung his head in shame. He suddenly realized that he had been too concerned with himself to give thanks. "That you must do," said his wife. "You must thank the man who has done so much for you."

"But he is in Jerusalem by now," said Caleb.

"Go back to Jerusalem and find him. That is the least you can do."

"Very well," said Caleb, "You are right, and I should like to see Jesus and talk with him. But let me spend one day at home. I will go tomorrow."

On the morrow Caleb did indeed set out for Jerusalem again and reached the city two days later. After inquiring a while he found someone who knew Jesus. "But hadn't you heard?" said the man. "Jesus died last night on a cross. You are too late to see him." Caleb turned homeward with a heavy heart and when he reached home and told his wife, she said, "Caleb, tomorrow is too late to give thanks."

This story reminds us of our innate self-centeredness. Once our own needs are satisfied we are on our way and leave behind any thought of how those needs were met. But we are thereby producing an uncompleted relationship. We are taking without any reciprocity. If we are helped by another person and give no thanks, the other person becomes an It, rather than a You, to use Martin Buber's terms. Receiving is also giving. If we receive graciously, with thought, with gratitude, we are also giving to the one who gives to us. We are recognizing the worth of the other person, we are helping the other person to feel that he or she is valuable as a person. We are also enriching ourselves by enlarging our own person to include the other. If we do not do this, we are merely taking - snatching a piece of good fortune and running away with it like a thief in the night.

That is part of the why we should give thanks. The obvious part, of course, is that we should give thanks because we have received something - a gift, a service, something which we ourselves have not produced.

Albert Schweitzer said:

"I always think that we live, spiritually, by what others have given us in the significant hours of our life....Much that has become our own in gentleness, modesty, kindness, willingness to forgive, in veracity, loyalty, resignation



under suffering, we owe to people in whom we have seen or experienced these virtues at work, sometimes in a great matter, sometimes in a small. I do not believe that we can put into anyone ideas which are not in him already. As a rule there are in everyone all sorts of good ideas, ready like tinder. But much of this tinder catches fire, or catches it successfully, only when it meets some flame or spark from outside, i.e., from some other person. Often, too, our own light goes out, and is rekindled by some experience we go through with a fellow-man. Thus we have, each of us, cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flames within us...

"Not one of us knows what effect his life produces, and what he gives to others; that is hidden from us and must remain so, though we are often allowed to see some little fraction of it, so that we may not lose courage. The way in which power works is a mystery.... Impart as much as you can of your spiritual being to those who are on the road with you, and accept as something precious what comes back to you from them."

\* \* \* \*

The why we are or should be thankful, and the what for, i.e., for what should we be thankful?, run together here. Jesus pointed out the need of thanking God for the right things: The Pharisee prayed, "I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or immoral, like everybody else; I thank you that I am not like that tax collector." The Pharisee is not really thankful here; he is passing judgment on everyone else. He seems to have only negative virtues.

Schweitzer gives thanks for quite other things. He says that he has had anxiety, trouble, sorrow in his own life, but he counts among his blessings:

"that I am allowed to work in the service of mercy; that my work has been successful; that I receive from other people affection and kindness in abundance; that I have loyal helpers, who identify themselves with my activity; that I enjoy a health which allows me to undertake most exhausting work; that I have a well-balanced temperament which varies little, and an energy which exerts itself with calmness and deliberation: and finally, that I can recognize as such whatever happiness falls to my lot, accepting it also as a thing for which some thank offering is due from me."

The leper Caleb in our story had much to be thankful for: not only ~~that~~ <sup>and</sup> he had been healed by Jesus,, but also that he had work, a loving family, a perceptive wife - things which many of us have and take for granted.

Paul, in writing to Timothy, says, "I give thanks to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength for my work, I thank him for considering me worthy, and appointing me to serve him."

And in the letter to Philemon, Paul says that every time he prays he mentions Philemon and gives thanks to God: "For I hear of your love for all God's people and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus.... Your love, dear brother, has brought me great joy and much encouragement. You have cheered the hearts of all God's people."

Paul expresses his gratitude to Philemon not only for being of help to the Christians, the "believers in the Way" as Paul calls them, but also for Philemon's being the kind of person he is.

Paul writes his thanks to Philemon. It is not enough just to feel grateful within oneself. Thanks must be expressed as well as felt.



Obviously thanks can be rendered not only in words but by deeds which enhance the effect of the words. Take an ordinary, everyday example from the letters to "Dear Abby", about those who are always on the receiving end. They are always accepting invitations and never extending them. They are always willing to receive favors but do not reach out to others. They may say, "Thank you" every time, but after a while their thanks are pretty hollow words. It has been said that there is no such thing as a grateful person who is stingy. There is no such thing as a stingy person who is grateful.

If we had to make a list of 20th century saints, probably Albert Schweitzer would be on the list. He expressed his thanks for what he had received and learned through the way in which he directed his whole life. Concerning this he wrote:

"On a bright summer morning in the Whitsuntide holiday in 1896 at Hünsbach, I awoke with the thought that my good fortune was not to be taken as something self-evident. However insignificant it might appear, the goal must be a direct service to humanity.....What seemed most senseless to my friends was that I wanted to go to Africa as a physician, not a missionary. This meant at thirty years of age a long, difficult period of training. I had no doubt myself that the project would require an exceptional effort.....I wanted to be a doctor so I could serve without having to talk.....This new calling appeared to me to be a matter of putting the religion of love to work rather than of talking about it."

We can, of course, without going to Africa, express our gratitude to people around us and to God by living right here the kind of lives for which Paul expressed his appreciation to Philemon.

\* \* \* \*

In Dr. Shepard's little book, SEEKING THE MIND OF CHRIST, he has a meditation on Appreciation, recalling the story of the woman who broke an alabaster jar of expensive perfume and poured the perfume over Jesus' head while he was eating at the house of Simon the leper. This was an act of appreciation on her part for which the others in the room criticized her. They considered she was wasting something so precious as the perfume. Jesus speaks: "Let her alone.....She has done a beautiful thing to me.....She has done what she could."

Dr. Shepard says: "Note that Jesus was the kind of man who could appreciate both the impetuous tribute brought by this woman and the practical hospitality provided by his host."

Dr. Shepard continues:

"Consider that if some people are stingy in giving, so others are niggardly in receiving. Think of the reasons why we often receive ungratefully and ungraciously:

Our pride makes us fear to be beholden.

Our greed looks for something better.

Our practical-mindedness blinds us to the supreme utility of beauty.

Our graspingness sees only the gift, not the giver."

\* \* \* \*

Gratitude is not only an expression on the part of us human beings. Most people who have had a dog in the family have experienced expressions of gratitude when the dog has been given desired food, or cared for when injured, or played with, or even just given a little attention now and then. The dog's response is not delayed - it is immediate. Can we do less?

Children have a less well developed sense of time than adults. Rewards as well as reprimands need to be immediate so thanks must be extended to a child at once. Immediate thanks removes any uncertainty as to whether a gift was received, a service appreciated, whether it was worth while doing something which seems desirable to us. Immediate thanks prevents uncertainty or a hurt to the giver. Even Jesus said, "Weren't there nine others?"

If we wait until tomorrow to give thanks we may forget to do it at all. Samuel Johnson said that if one waits to do a great deal of good all at once, nothing will ever get done. It might also be said, that one who waits for polished phrases and fancy words to express thanks may never get to do it at all.

To quote Schweitzer again:

"We ought all to make an effort to act on our first thoughts and let our unspoken gratitude find expression. Then there will be more sunshine in the world, and more power to work for what is good."

"When I look back upon my youth I am moved by the thought of all the people whom I have to thank for what they gave to me or what they meant to me. Yet I am haunted by an oppressive consciousness of the little gratitude I really showed them while I was young. How many of them have said farewell to life without my having made clear to them what it meant to me to receive from them so much kindness or so much care! Many a time have I, with a feeling of shame quietly uttered words of gratitude over the graves of those to whom I should have spoken while they were still living."

Tomorrow is too late to give thanks.