

A RESPONSE OF GRATITUDE

Luke 17:11-19

We give because God has been good to us.

A sermon preached by
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I wouldn't blame you if you told me you were having a hard time feeling thankful this year. By any measure, 2020 has been a year of challenges. We daily hang on the news of the pandemic. The economy took a disastrous hit. We have agonized over the racial and political unrest in the country. We have seen terrible natural disasters—from wildfires to hurricanes—around the world. 2020 is one year most of us will be glad to put behind us.

I don't want to minimize at all the reality of the suffering that millions of people have experienced this year. But for most of us, 2020 has been a major inconvenience. We have had to wear masks, and they make our face feel funny. We have had to keep our distance, and we are short on handshakes and hugs that make us feel good. We have had to wash our hands more often than usual. Mostly 2020 has blown up our social calendar. We have had to forego dinners, parties, travel, and now family get-togethers for the holidays. For many, 2020 has been a tragic year, for most of us, it has been an irritation.

The German government recently instituted fresh restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, shutting restaurants, bars and gyms, and setting limits on the number of people who can meet in public and private settings. They put out an ad depicting an elderly man recalling his “service” to the nation back when he was just a young student “in the winter of 2020, when the whole country’s eyes were on us.” He recalls, “I had just turned 22 and was studying engineering when the second wave hit.” As heart-rending music swells in the background, he says, “Suddenly the fate of this country lay in our hands. So we mustered all our courage and did what was expected of us, the only right thing.” The music stops, and he declares, “We did nothing. Days and nights we stayed on our backsides at home, lazy as raccoons, and fought against the spread of the coronavirus. Our couch was the front line, and patience was our weapon.” The ad ends with a government message that “you too can become a hero by staying at home.”¹

One of the many memes I have seen about 2020 said, “Your grandparents were called to war. You were called to sit on your couch. You can do this.” And we are doing this. We have seen some incredibly creative and positive things come out of the pandemic. We have taken great steps forward in technology for churches, schools, and businesses. We will have a vaccine

for a terrible disease in less than a year. The economy and our people have proved resilient. Most folks are working very hard to make the best of the situation. There are many things to be thankful for, even in the midst of the sad, difficult, and tragic things we see.

Our Scripture text today tells about an encounter Jesus had with some men who didn't have much to be thankful for. He was on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, and he passed a village with a leper colony. Leprosy was the COVID of the first century—terrible, incurable, and infectious. People with leprosy were quarantined and had to beg for a living. When Jesus came by, they practiced social distancing, but they cried out for help: “*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*”² Jesus sent the ten of them to the priests, who were the ones designated in the Law to declare a leper clean. On the way to the synagogue, the lepers were healed.

One of the lepers had another problem. He was a Samaritan. The priest would not even have recognized him, because he was a foreigner and considered a heretic by the Jews. When he discovered he was clean, he returned, praising God and thanking Jesus.

This is where it gets weird. Jesus complains that only this foreigner returned to thank him: “*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?*”³ Then he pronounced a benediction on the Samaritan (Luke likes Samaritans, you remember.) “*Get up and go on your way,*” he says, “*your faith has made you well.*”⁴

What's going on here? Jesus had told the Jewish lepers to go to the priests. They were just following the Law and his command. Were they not also healed? Were they necessarily ungrateful, or were they just being obedient? Dr. Fred Craddock explains this conundrum as Luke putting two stories together.⁵ There is the healing of ten lepers, but there is also a salvation story for the Samaritan leper. Not only was he sick, but he was also outside of the religious community. In this encounter with Jesus, he not only finds healing; he finds faith as well. When Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well,” he is not talking about the healing. The word there can mean healing, but it also means wholeness and salvation. It's the same word Jesus would use a few days later when he told Zacchaeus, “*Today salvation*

*has come to this house, ...for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*⁶ Both the healing and the experience of faith lead to gratitude.

Today I want to take you on a journey to gratitude. The first step is the cry for help. The first step for the lepers begging by the side of the road was to call out to Jesus for mercy. The first step on our journey to gratitude is to realize our need for the mercy and grace of Jesus. We cannot make it on our own. We are broken by sin, anxiety, and inadequacy. We need the healing grace of God. We need the salvation that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. We need to cry out with the lepers, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on me!”

Mother Teresa of Calcutta told this story to the National Prayer Breakfast in 1994. One evening she and some of her nuns went out and picked up four people off the street. One of them was in terrible condition. Teresa told the sisters to take care of three of them, and she would take care of the worst one.

She said, “I did for her all that my love could do. I put her in a bed, and there was such a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand as she said two words only: ‘Thank you.’ Then she died. I could not help but examine my conscience before her. I asked: What would I say if I were in her place? My answer was very simple. I would have tried to draw a little attention to myself. I would have said, ‘I am hungry, I am dying, I am in pain,’ or something. But she gave me much more; she gave me her grateful love. She died with a smile on her face. Gratitude brings a smile and becomes a gift.”⁷

We start our journey toward gratitude by realizing that we are in need and there is Someone who can help us. The next step is an act of God. Jesus stops on his way and instructs the lepers to go find a priest and be declared clean. As they walk, the lepers find new strength in their limbs. Their fingers and toes have feeling and flexibility. Their ravaged skin becomes smooth and supple. It’s a miracle of healing, an act of God.

Then one leper also has a change of heart. His healing happens on the inside. He returns to Jesus and praises God and thanks his Savior. Jesus tells him his faith has saved him. He is whole again.

We can see acts of God all around us if we know how to look. Medical professionals are doing more and more every day to treat and save COVID patients. People are reaching out to their neighbors to make sure their needs are taken care of, especially elderly friends. Communities are responding to areas devastated by fires and hurricanes. Do you find your faith intact after all these struggles? That's an act of God. Are you finding comfort and strength as you face these uncertain days? In spite of the trouble all around you and maybe in you, do you also have a spiritual peace about it all? Do you believe that we will get through this and that everything will be all right? That is an act of God. When we see God at work in the worst of our situations, it fills our hearts with praise and thanksgiving. It grows gratitude in us.

Rev. Caleb Lucien is the founder of Hosean International Ministries, a mission to Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. In 2008, Haiti was devastated by two hurricanes in a matter of weeks. Hosean Ministries was involved in providing food, clothing, and shelter to those who had lost everything. A few weeks after the hurricanes, he wrote this report:

“This past Sunday, November 2, was a great emotional high for me. Together with my team, I had the privilege of worshiping at Berraca Baptist Church led by Pastor Petitde. During the most recent storms he was stuck on the roof of his house for 3 days with 72 people under frightening and difficult conditions. It was so familiar to him because in the storms of 2004, he watched his wife swept away in the raging current and drowned. From a human standpoint, I could not understand how they got the strength to worship.

“More than 400 believers, which represented a third of their congregation, were together worshiping the Lord. They were counting their blessings, while they had lost most of their possessions. The storms had destroyed their homes, their community, and had taken away almost everything, but could not take away their confidence and trust in our Almighty God. ...I could not hold back the tears of both joy and sadness as I stood up to share with them. At the end of the service, several came to thank me for the help.” Help was simple stuff—a dress, a pair of shoes,

food, insulin. Caleb Lucien testified, “We left the church with a sense of joy, yet knowing that the needs are still so great.”⁸

The needs are still great, in our country and in our world. The needs are great in our own community. The needs are great in our own homes, in our own hearts. That’s why we do ministry. But we have joy today, because we have cried out to God, and God has helped us, and we can respond with gratitude. When we cry out to God, and God helps us, then we want to do something in return. We want to make a response of gratitude. God has been so good to us, and we want to give something back. That is the motivation behind our giving to the church. It’s not to support the institution. It’s not to pay the bills. It’s not to underwrite a budget. We give because we are grateful for the blessings of Almighty God, and we want to give back. We want to be a part of this life-changing, transformational thing God is doing in the world. We have found healing, wholeness, and salvation, too, and we just want to share the joy.

Today and in the next few days, you will have an opportunity to estimate what your giving to the church will be in the next year. It’s not a contract; it’s an estimate, and if you ever need to change it, that’s not a problem. I hope in all our communication over the last few years that you have come to understand your giving as a matter of faith and service to God, a way to express your gratitude and joy for the blessings you have received. If you have not prayed over your estimate yet, if you have not said, “Lord, where do you want me to be in my giving?” I want you to wait a couple of days until you have spent some time with God over this. This year a few of us will turn in cards in worship, but the vast majority of us will mail in cards or fill one out online. We won’t have the inspirational time in worship of seeing the church come forward to dedicate their estimates together. But that may be a blessing in disguise, because it will put the focus where it needs to be—on your relationship with God and your response of gratitude. These are different times, but our gratitude is not determined by the times we live in. Our gratitude depends on the timeless grace of God. Can you take the next step in your giving, as God leads you to greater gratitude?

The coronavirus pandemic is not nearly the first time the Church has dealt with widespread disease. German pastor Martin Rinkart served in the

walled town of Eilenburg during the horrors of the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648. Eilenburg became an overcrowded refuge for the surrounding area. The fugitives suffered from epidemic and famine. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great Pestilence, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. One abandoned his post for healthier areas and could not be persuaded to return. Pastor Rinkart officiated at the funerals of the other two. As the only pastor left, he often conducted services for as many as 40 to 50 persons *a day*—some 4,480 in all. In May of that year, his own wife died. By the end of the year, the refugees had to be buried in trenches without services.

Yet living in a world dominated by disease and death, Pastor Rinkart wrote a prayer for his children to offer to the Lord. It later became a beautiful hymn that we still sing today:

*Now thank we all our God
With hearts and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom this world rejoices.
Who, from our mother's arms,
Hath led us on our way,
With countless gifts of love
And still is ours today.⁹*

Maybe it's a little harder to be thankful in 2020, but maybe that's the best reason of all to be thankful this year. Maybe it's time to pivot from giving thanks for our circumstances to giving thanks for our blessings. Maybe it's time to pivot from giving thanks for our stuff to giving thanks for our healing, wholeness, and salvation. We have cried out to God, and God has acted in Jesus Christ. We owe God a response of gratitude. We give because God has been so good to us. That is not the least we can do; that is the best we can do.

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic>.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZgmIx3FmKc>.

² Luke 17:13.

³ Luke 17:17-18.

⁴ Luke 17:19.

⁵ Fred Craddock. *Luke: Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 202f.

⁶ Luke 19:9-10.

⁷ *Leadership*, Vol. 16, No. 2.

⁸ Email from Hosean International Ministries, November 11, 2008.

⁹ *United Methodist Hymnal*, #102. Harry Genet, "The Unlikely Thanker," *Men of Integrity*, March 3, 2000.