

February 21, 2021

An Opportunity to Express Thanks

Jesus and the lepers



Special Music: "Take a Little Time"

Andre Crouch

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d4IZ63PW8>

Luke 17:11-19

11 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.

12 As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance

13 and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

14 When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests. ”And as they went, they were cleansed.

15 One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice.

16 He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

17 Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?

18 Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?”

19 Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

<http://whatwillmatter.com>

Michael Josephsen:

Finding God in the Park

Abe was fiercely independent, even at age 85, but after a mild stroke his son insisted he move in with him. Abe missed going to the park near his old apartment, and one Saturday he set out to find it.

When he became disoriented, he asked a young boy named Timmy where the park was. Timmy said he'd like to take him there, but he didn't have time because he was looking for God. He said he needed to talk to Him about why his parents were getting a divorce.

"Maybe God's in the park," the old man said. "I'd like to talk to Him, too, about why He's made me useless." And so, they set off together to find God.

At the park, Timmy began to cry about the divorce, and Abe lovingly held his face in both hands and looked him straight in the eyes. "Timmy, I don't know why bad things happen, but I know it wasn't because of you. I know you're a good boy and your parents love you and you'll be okay."

Timmy gave Abe a big hug and said, "I'm so glad I met you. Thanks. I think I can go now."

From across the street, Timmy's mother saw them hug and approached her son in a worried voice. "Who was that old man?"

"I think he's God," Timmy said.

"Did he say that?" she demanded.

"No, but when he touched me and told me I'm going to be okay, I felt really better. Only God can do that."

When Abe got home, his son asked in a scolding voice, "Where were you?"

"I was in the park with God."

"Really? What makes you think you were with God?"

"Because He sent me a boy who needed me, and when the boy hugged me, I felt God telling me I wasn't useless anymore."

I do not know of a single person that wasn't grateful to see the year 2020 disappear in the rear-view mirror. 2020 was hard on everybody for all kinds of reasons and everyone I know was so looking forward to 2021 because, well, it had to be better than 2020. But here we are a little over a month into 2021 and while there appears to be some light at the end of the tunnel, from where we are, the tunnel exit still seems to be a long way off. Between COVID-19, the delays in the vaccine, the political climate, riots and now this winter freeze which appears to be one of the, if not the, coldest one in recorded history here in Fort Stockton. Record lows and snowfalls are being recorded all across the state, and as of the time that I wrote this message, there have been 17 related deaths in Texas due to this particular storm which has been named URI.

Sometimes, it is difficult to be thankful when our only real objective is survival and to minimize the damage occurring around us. We worry that the pipes will freeze. We worry that we might get sick. We worry that we might slip on the ice and hurt ourselves. We worry about the actions of our world and national leaders. We worry about the violence that people perpetrate on each other in the name of justice and freedom. We worry about our families and whether they are safe and warm. And if they are not, we worry about whether we have the resources to help. We worry about our community. We worry about our church. We worry about our friends and fellow congregants.

God does not want us to worry, but He understands when we do. It is difficult to be thankful when it is 10 degrees outside and there is no heat in the house. It is difficult when we know someone that we love who is dependent on machines to help them breath or provide medicine and there is no electricity for those machines. It is hard to be thankful when the only food in the house requires cooking and there is no way to cook it. It is scary when the pantry is empty, and you have no way to get to a store. It is hard to be thankful when the water stops flowing. God truly understands that it is difficult to let go and trust that He will provide, to be grateful for the knowledge that He has the situation under control.

We can quote scripture until we are blue in the face regarding how much God loves us and promises to take care of us, but it is a whole different matter to step into that promise when the situation is dire, and we realize that we have no control over it. But it is in those circumstances that we find we have no choice but to step into the promise on faith, to lean into Jesus, and we come to a place of understanding the nature of God's love, grace, and mercy.

We may not have heat, but we have blankets and maybe a fireplace. We may not have lights, but we probably have a few candles and maybe a flashlight or two. We may not have all the conveniences we like, but most of us have been around long enough to have the knowledge of what it takes to go "old school". We may

not be able to check on everyone we know, but we probably have loved ones close by. It is extremely important during these times to check on each other and provide for each other's needs. We may not have everything that we think that we need, but we do have enough to be thankful for.

Remember the story in 1 Kings chapter 17 regarding the widow who lived in Zarephath? Elijah asked her for some water and a piece of bread. Her reply was one of total hopelessness.

“I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

Can you hear the tone of total destitution in her voice? “That we may eat it – and die.” That feeling of being totally, completely out of hope and giving into the inevitable.

But Elijah tells her to go ahead and make the bread for him, herself, and her son anyway. And then he tells her that the flour and oil will not run out until such a time as the drought ends and rain comes. I'm pretty sure that the human side of her that had already given up was floating thoughts through her brain like “Well, this is it. I'm going empty the pantry and I will share what I make with this stranger and then we will all just curl up and die, because there will be no more.”

But everything happened just as Elijah predicted. Every day, she was able to

make food for herself, her son and Elijah and the flour and oil did not run out. Every morning was a day for potential disaster and an end to everything she knew. She could have fixated on that. Instead, every day provided a new opportunity to give thanks and she did so by embracing her faith and making a meal for the three of them, being thankful for the continued provision.

This is not about being an optimist. It is not a glass being half full or half empty. It is about the glass being empty and the knowing through faith that God is going to fill it up and make it overflow so that there is plenty for everyone. And with that faith comes an air of anticipation. Don't you know that the widow rose each morning with the anticipation of seeing that there was enough flour, oil and water for another day?

Don't we know that the Israelites arose each morning with the anticipation of collecting the mana that had created for them? Don't we know that it was with anticipation as each person selected food from the baskets of fish and bread when they were passed around to feed the 5000? Don't we know our own anticipation of casting our fishing nets out and them being so full that we hardly have the strength to draw them back to the boat? Don't you know the anticipation of the woman that reached out to touch the hem of Christ's garment in order to be healed? And don't we realize that God remains in control, knows our circumstances, and is just waiting for us to put out hands and accept His

provisions? That the cold will pass and that there will be warm days ahead? Don't we realize that we should be in constant anticipation of seeing God at work as He rights the wrongs of this world? Don't we understand that every opportunity we are given to lean into faith, will also provide an opportunity to express thanks?

Where does that leave us with our scripture today? Ten men with leprosy are walking together down the road and encounter Jesus. Lepers often traveled together since they were seldom allowed in the company of non-lepers. Lepers were considered unclean for both religious and civil reasons. It was very similar to people who are quarantined due to COVID-19. Lepers were often shunned by society and treated like an inferior class, lower than beggars. If you encountered a leper on the road, the leper was expected to move off the road and make way for people to pass, thereby allowing the non-lepers to avoid contamination.

So, here is Jesus and His entourage walking down the road and they encounter these 10 lepers. The lepers move off to the side of the road to let Jesus and His followers pass but they shout out to Him, **“Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”** We see that they know who Jesus is. Here is their opportunity to get cleansed, to end their life of separation and destitution. This is their chance to return to normal society and rejoin their families. This is an opportunity to refill their cups.

Jesus has mercy on them and tells them to go show themselves to the priests and on their way to see the priests, their leprosy is cured. This opportunity for healing has not only given them their health back but changed the way that they live their lives. They are no longer set apart and shunned. They will no longer have to live in isolation.

What nine of these souls did not grasp was that this was also an opportunity to express thanks. As magnificent as the opportunity was that made them whole, they only received half the blessings. They did not embrace the opportunity to express thanks for that cleansing. They were so involved with their own blessing that they could not see there was more to that blessing to be had. It is also made very clear that the only cleansed leper to return was a Samaritan. He wasn't even a Jew. He was a foreigner.

I don't want to step off the path too far, but I do want to make a very significant point here. Jesus goes out of His way on more than one occasion to point out that the opportunities that He affords are not limited to those who believe like us. This is a primary tenet of our belief system as Disciples of Christ. The woman at the well was a Samaritan and she was the first person Jesus revealed Himself to in His ministry. The parable of Good Samaritan focuses on the grace and mercy of a non-Jew, a foreigner, a Samaritan. For us to think that the opportunities that Christ provides for us are limited to some kind of Jesus club, is a testimony to a

lack of tolerance towards God's children who do not embrace our concepts and beliefs. It is not the Jesus way and we, as followers of Christ, are all called to the Jesus way.

With regards to our Opportunity to Express Thanks, every situation that God brings to our path is an opportunity to express thanks. It is the landing point for every blessing and every opportunity.

Hard times provide opportunity for growth – We give thanks for the growth.

God provides needed resources – We give thanks for the resources.

God provides comfort in our grief – We give thanks for that comfort.

God provides healing – We give thanks for that healing.

God provides our daily bread – We give thanks for that daily bread.

God provides opportunity for rest – We give thanks for that rest.

God provides mentors and teachers – We give thanks for knowledge and wisdom.

God provides companionship – We give thanks for that companionship.

God provides peace of mind – We give thanks for that peace of mind.

God provides opportunities for service – We give thanks for those opportunities for service.

God places people that need our help in our paths – We give thanks for those people.

God give us opportunities to be a blessing to others – We give thanks for those opportunities.

In our opening story today, we find two people in search of answers from God. God provides both people not only with those answers but also to be the answer for the other person. Both are not only providing blessings to each other but also receiving blessing by allowing Jesus to work through them to meet the other's need. Being of service to our fellow man, allowing Christ to overflow through us and touch others is an overwhelming opportunity to give back to our community and thus providing an opportunity to give thanks that God is able to use us.

Let us be open to the opportunities that God lays in our path and let us also see that the opportunity to express thanks is the completion of the blessings in our lives.

AMEN

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