



Thank You

TEXT
Luke 17:11–19

November 26, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

This is the only place in all of scripture where someone thanks Jesus. This is almost unbelievable to me. Jesus, the Son of Man, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Good Shepherd, the true vine, the Lamb of God, the one who time and time again points us toward life, pulls us up into the light, forgives us more often than we deserve, and heals us of our every ailment — only once does he hear, “Thank you.” And it happens here, in today’s reading.

It’s a curious story. Jesus enters a village and is approached by 10 lepers. They cry out for mercy, and Jesus being Jesus, hears them and heals them. “Go,” he says. “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” for in those days only a religious leader could confirm someone clean again; only a religious leader could say on behalf of an entire community, “Come on in. Welcome home. You are one of us again.”

So of course the lepers do exactly as they are told. And while they are walking, they are made clean. Nine of them obediently continue on their way, but one of them turns

around and runs back, falling at Jesus’ feet and saying, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” Watching this happen, Jesus looks around, does the math, and asks where the other nine might be.

“Why are you the only one who returned?” he says. And then he says, “Get up and go again on your way — your faith has made you well.”

Which is great, but ... he’s already been made well, hasn’t he? Isn’t that what turns around in the first place? Skin that is free of disease, a life that is free of isolation? It doesn’t seem to make much sense — not until you poke around and realize our English translations sometimes let us down.

In verse 15, when the leper realizes he is clean, the verb used there refers to a physical healing. It’s different in verse 19. The verb used there is *sozo*, and translating *sozo* as “made well” is a pretty weak translation. It’s better and most often translated as “saved.” To be saved. To be rescued. To be delivered. And always in a divine sense. Getting well from an illness is one thing. But truly getting well? Becoming whole? Being saved? That’s another matter altogether.

Ten lepers have faith enough to ask Jesus to heal them — and he does. They were all healed. But only one is saved — the one that turns around to say, “Thank you. Thank you.”

So this is the question that has chased me for weeks now: What is it about gratitude that saves us? It’s got to be about more than just good manners, right? Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for good manners. But it’s more than that, right?

Growing up, a woman named Mrs. Vince lived four houses down the street from me.

I think it is very likely she had a first name other than “Mrs.” but I couldn’t tell you what it was. Mrs. Vince was the mother of Courtney, my neighborhood best friend.

Now like me, you may have all grown up with the 10 commandments, but Courtney grew up with 11. The last one was this: “Thou shalt write thank you notes.” You weren’t really thankful, her mother thought, and your gratitude was not properly expressed, until you had communicated it by means of the United States Postal Service. She believed this so fervently that any gifts

her daughter received were allowed to be used and played with and enjoyed the day they were received. But come the next morning, all those gifts were taken hostage, to be released only when notes were written, envelopes were sealed and stamps were affixed.

I thought this was heinous. I was outraged on my friend's behalf and bemoaned this injustice. If I had known what Child Protective Services was at the time, I probably would have tried to call them.

Emboldened by what was little more than my desire to play with her new things, Courtney appealed to her mother, "But I already said thank you once!" Mrs. Vince, whose first name I never even wondered about, said something it would take me years to really understand. She sat us down with paper and pencils and said, "It's more about connecting the dots, girls."

Mrs. Vince understood perfectly what happened between Jesus and the grateful leper. They were connected. Gratitude connected them. Every gift we receive, every moment of grace that washes down over us, it connects us to the one who gives it.

Here's another way of saying it: Every gift comes with a person attached. And when we accept that gift with gratitude, real gratitude, we accept that person too. Gratitude turns us toward one another and binds us together. It also changes the way we see one another.

I spent this past week with some of my dearest friends:

Sarah, Joseph and their three-year-old twins. As many of you know, holidays with little ones are a blessed mix of chaos, cookies, tantrums, lost socks and shoes, and abject, unqualified wonder.

The day after Thanksgiving, we put up the Christmas tree. The adults wrestled it into the living room and up into the stand. The kids bounced on the couch, maintaining a safe distance, but unable to contain their excitement. The lights went up, and the kids yelled, "Wow!" and then it was time to decorate.

My job was to attach the hooks to each ornament and then gently hand it to a child.

"Be careful now," I warned them. "These are fragile and beautiful, and we don't want to break them."

I called Zoe over. I said, "Zoe, this one is for you," and put a sparkly silver ball in her hands. And Zoe, with lights shining behind her and eyes opened wide, held it gently, and she whispered, "Thank you. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

Because they are three years old, this routine never got old, not once. Every ornament they took from my hands, the same words, hushed with wonder: "Thank you. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." "Thank you. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." "Thank you. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

I'm somewhat chagrined to tell you that about three-

quarters of the way through the ornaments, I grabbed a wayward sock that was on the floor, striped with bright colors, but dirty on the bottom from covering little feet. I placed it on an ornament hook and handed it over. "Thank you," Zoe said. "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." And she hung it on the tree.

Her mother laughed at her. "Zoe," she said, "you just put your dirty sock on the tree. Are you even paying attention?"

And Zoe looked at her and said, "But Mama, look — today, everything is beautiful. Even my sock!" Her mother looked at me. You've seen some variety of this look before. This particular version was the "thanks-a-lot-because-of-you-I'm-going-to-have-to-explain-to-everyone-why-there's-a-child's-sock-on-our-tree" look.

I started to apologize, but I'd only gotten a couple of words out when Zoe interrupted me.

"It's OK, Jenny," she said. "The decorations are beautiful. My sock is beautiful. And you are beautiful too!"

I wonder if that's not the true secret behind gratitude. Not only is it powerful enough to make you stop in your tracks, turn around and throw yourself on the ground; it is powerful enough to change the way we see one another. It unleashes in us an imagination that is nothing less than holy — the kind of imagination that hangs a sock on a tree and says it's beautiful; the kind of imagina-

tion that looks at a loaf of bread and a cup full of wine and says it's an endless, joyful feast; the kind of imagination that looks at a beach full of fishermen and says, "OK, this will do"; the kind of imagination that looks at a sealed tomb and says, "Life will burst forth." It unleashes in us an awareness of grace.

In Thrity Umrigar's novel *Everybody's Son*, Anton Coleman is the adopted son of a senator. His birth mother, Juanita, was imprisoned after leaving Anton alone for seven days in a locked apartment while she chased after drugs. She surrenders custody to Anton's foster parents, and the boy suddenly enters a life of immense privilege and power, with parents who adore him. Even still, he can't help but wonder about the mother who gave him up. And he can't help but harbor no small grudge against her.

Eventually, when he is grown, Anton and his mother reconnect. Their first meeting does not go well. Anton leaves his mother's home, driving away quickly. In the days that follow, he is overcome by gratitude once again for his adopted parents, for the life that found him that he did nothing to deserve.

His gratitude only increases when he is pulled over by the police, a black man alone on a country road. The incident ends with no harm. It does, however, end with a changed heart.

"It came to him then. How often had an incident like this occurred in his mother's life? How many such insults and

humiliations had she endured? And how had she dealt with them? Had she smiled and cowered, as he had? Or had her eyes blazed with anger, the corners of her mouth turned down with fear and hatred? He remembered her dark liquid eyes, her girl-like face, and his heart pinched with regret. How had she done it? How had she kicked her drug addiction and stayed sober in a world that seemed designed to break down women like her? A world where perhaps the sanest response was to lose yourself in a drugged stupor? What an iron will she must possess, he thought. What pools of courage must lie behind her eyes."

That's the thing about gratitude. It puts the reality of grace right in front of our eyes, and that becomes the lens through which we see everything and everyone else. On our best days, that can change how we move through the world. It can save us. Among other things, it can save us from ourselves.

Can saying thank you really make that much of a difference? It sounds awfully naive, even to me. But even still, I believe it can. I trust that slowly and surely, when we allow gratitude to shape our lives, that's when we suddenly see the whole world shimmering with the presence of Love. It happened one day long ago, on the road between Samaria and Galilee. And you are the ones who have taught me to trust that it still happens today as well — which is why I want to thank you.

Thank you for showing up this morning.

Thank you for coming from all the other things you could have been doing, for taking the effort I know it took to come and join your voices and your body and your hearts with mine this morning.

Thank you for coming week after week because this thing we do together, this worship we offer together, it knits me back together, it holds me together. It makes another week possible. And you make it happen every week. Thank you.

Thank you for ways you live your faith. I see but only a part of it, but what I see always amazes me. You listen to one another. You work to get along with one another. You work to get along with me and Len and Rodger and Tom and Zach and Hallie and Will and Elisa and Matthew and all the rest of us. You stick with us even when we mess up. Being community together isn't always easy. But that daily effort of loving each other matters. Thank you.

Thank you for asking good questions.

Thank you for teaching me about prayer, and faith, and trust.

Thank you for sharing your wisdom.

Thank you for taking risks and trying new things.

Thank you for having a sense of humor and not letting any of us take ourselves too seriously. Thank you.

Thank you for being peacemakers and healers and teachers and builders and prophets

and caregivers and earth stewards. You are salt and yeast and light for a weary world. In your paid work and in your daily routine, you are filled with kindness and compassion, with a love of justice and desire for mercy. That matters. It matters to me. It matters to others. Thank you.

Thank you for caring for one another, and caring for me.

Thank you for caring for lots of other people, including some we'll never see face to face.

Thank you for keeping your promises.

Thank you for standing tall in the storm, and listening to the angels. You inspire me, and you encourage me. Thank you.

Thank you for telling the truth about life when it's hard.

Thank you for sharing your failures and your disappointments and your regrets and vulnerabilities and grief. Your honesty gives me, and countless others, strength. In you, I see the face of Jesus, every day. Thank you.

Thank you for loving so well and for desiring to love more.

Thank you for being yourselves, for being children of God, holy and beloved — nothing more, nothing less. You mean the world to me. To borrow a line from my young friend Zoe, “Thank you. You, Village Church, are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

I think Jesus is right. Saying thank you can save our lives. It seems too simple. But the world comes alive, and we

do, too, when gratitude shapes us and directs our steps. It opens our eyes, and we see things that otherwise we might have missed.

Thank you for showing me that the kingdom of God is among us, right now. Thank you.

And thanks be to the One from whom all good gifts flow.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.