

“Thank My Lucky Stars” or “Thank Heaven”?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 22, 2020

- Psalm 116:12-13, 17-19 Common English Bible
¹² What can I give back to the LORD for all the good things he has done for me?
¹³ I'll lift up the cup of salvation. I'll call on the LORD's name....
¹⁷ So I'll offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to you, and I'll call on the LORD's name.
¹⁸ I'll keep the promises I made to the LORD in the presence of all God's people,
¹⁹ in the courtyards of the LORD's house, which is in the center of Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD!
- Luke 17:11-19 (Common English Bible) ¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, ¹³ they raised their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, show us mercy!” ¹⁴ When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” As they left, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.”

Henry Ward Beecher was our nation's most prominent Protestant preacher of the mid-nineteenth century. He was best known because of his oratory skill and ability to speak to the issues of the day. His name might sound familiar to you because of his sister Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote a little book called “Uncle Tom's Cabin.” Reverend Beecher once tried to describe the effect on one's life that came from having a grateful, thankful disposition. He wrote

If one should give me a dish of sand and tell me there were particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my eyes and search for them with my clumsy fingers and be unable to detect them; but let me take a magnet and sweep through it and now would it draw to itself the almost invisible particles by the mere power of attraction.

The unthankful heart, like my fingers in the sand, discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day and as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find in every hour, some heavenly blessings.¹

One of the earliest lessons we learn from our parents is to remember what they might have called “the magic words of Please and Thank You.” When we were overjoyed at receiving the gift of a new toy, our immediate immersion in excited fascination probably necessitated a reminder to pause and say Thank You. Of course, we might not have been particularly sincere when we had to say Thank you when Aunt

¹ --Henry Ward Beecher, https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=991

Josephine put more broccoli on our dinner plate. Eventually, though, we learned that the polite thing was to say Thank You when an act of intended kindness or generosity was done for us.

Yes, most of us, most of the time, have become accustomed to saying Thank You in response to particular actions.

But there's a better way: gratitude not as a reaction to an event, but as a way of looking at the world.

This predisposition to recognize and appreciate the abundance of blessings that overflow in our lives is illustrated in a story about an event in the life of Jesus commonly called "The Healing of Ten Lepers."

This story is perfectly suited for a global pandemic. There are ten men who have been identified as having a skin disease (often said to be leprosy). In ancient Israel, the threat of being contaminated and contracting the disease caused great fear among people. Consequently, it became accepted practice that anyone identified as having this skin condition was required to be quarantined from society.

- They had to live outside of the village.
- They had to wear torn clothing to signal their physical imperfection.
- And should anyone approach them, they had to call out "Unclean! Unclean!" as a warning that they were considered contagious.
- That cry also was a self-declaration that their diseased condition rendered them excluded from the activities of the religious community.

One day these ten men learned that the popular teacher Jesus was in the vicinity. They called out to him, "Master, show us mercy!"

Jesus responded. Jesus didn't lay his hands on them or rub their diseased rashes with mud or even draw close to them. Instead, he told them to go find a synagogue priest.

Why would he say that?

He wasn't passing them off on someone else just to get them out of his hair. What Jesus told them to do *should* have filled the men with excitement and expectation. You see, Jewish scripture addressed the situation of a person who was considered ritually unclean for social or religious involvement. The tradition directed that a person who had been cleansed or healed from such a condition needed to be checked out by a priest. It was the priest who could determine if they had been made well and should be allowed to rejoin society in general and the fellowship of the synagogue in particular.

In the story, when Jesus told the men to go and be examined, immediately the ten headed off to find the village priest. As they went, somewhere along the way their skin condition was healed. One of the ten peeled off from the group and returned, shouting praise to God as he knelt at the feet of Jesus.

Jesus noted that this man was the only one of the ten who returned to praise God with words of thanks for this blessing of healing. "Where are the other nine?" Jesus asked rhetorically, suggesting that only this one was appreciative of what had been done for him.

Were the other nine not as grateful as the one who returned? Someone has come up with possible reasons why the other nine didn't also return to Jesus proclaiming God's praise before showing themselves to the priest. Perhaps, he suggested,

- 1) One waited to see if the cure was real.
- 2) One waited to see if it would last.
- 3) One said he would see Jesus later.
- 4) One decided that he had never had leprosy.
- 5) One said he would have gotten well anyway.
- 6) One gave the glory to the priest.
- 7) One said, "Oh, well, Jesus didn't really do anything."
- 8) One said, "Any rabbi could have done it."
- 9) One said, "I was already much improved."²

But what *about* the other nine? Why didn't they return to Jesus with words of praise for God? Where, in fact, *were* they? In fact, they were doing exactly what Jesus had directed them to do: they were searching out the local priest. So I don't think it's fair to praise the one at the expense of the other nine. I'm sure they were grateful for this blessing of healing. It meant not only health but restoration: being restored to their village, restored to their synagogue, restored to their families and friends.

But about that one... the one who returned voicing praise to God for the blessing of healing and kneeling at the feet of Jesus. What made him different from the others? Two things:

First, remember Henry Ward Beecher's image of a thankful heart as being like a magnet attracting iron filings as it moved through a scoop of sand? The one who returned had a heart predisposed to being grateful – grateful regardless of his mood or his circumstances or his resources or his companions. He was inclined not only to appreciate the gift he had been given but recognize the source of the blessing.

The second thing that made the one who returned different from the others was that he was a Samaritan. When you hear that term you probably think of the parable Jesus told about a "good Samaritan." What was that all about? The Samaritans and the Jews were similar but different. The Samaritans had branched off from mainline Judaism several hundred years before the time of Jesus³, and the two groups grew to view and treat one another with distrust.

Remembering that parable, of the three who came upon a man who had been robbed and beaten, the two Jewish travelers passed by the injured man, not stopping to help. It was the outsider – the Samaritan – who showed acts of loving-kindness toward the beat-up man. Similarly, in this story of the healing of the ten men, Jesus pointed out that the one whose grateful heart predisposed him to recognize God at work in the healing was a Samaritan. In pointing that out, Jesus seemed to be saying that having a grateful heart is not the specialty of one race or religion. Rather, it's up to the individual to cultivate a thankful outlook in life.

² The NEWSLETTER Newsletter, June, 1990, 3.

https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=991

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samaritan> accessed 11/12/2020

Ironic that at Thanksgiving time – at the end of the growing season – we consider cultivating. But doing just that – cultivating a predisposition to having a thankful outlook – can be a helpful key to protect us against slipping into discouragement or depression. Especially as the weeks of this pandemic have rolled into months, it's perfectly natural for discouragement to set in.

I was reading about a couple dealing with that very thing – as they'd read the paper or watch TV or follow online media or encountered rudeness in the marketplace they found that they had slipped into a pattern of saying "That's the worst!" The pandemic had gotten them down, and their habit of noting the negative seemed to pull them down even deeper: "That's the worst!"

That's when they resolved to reshape their outlook – looking not for "the worst" that life had to offer, but "the best" in their daily lives that they were appreciative of. Soon it became a habit, and they found joy in pointing out to each other the blessings that they had previously allowed to go unrecognized. She would say, "Those trees full of songbirds are the best!" Driving down the road, her husband would say, "Living in a county that takes care of its roads is the best!"⁴ I can imagine that if you and I did that, we would find ourselves recognizing a lot of blessings that we're blind to today as we scurry through our daily lives.

Cultivating a predisposition to having a thankful outlook can enrich our everyday lives, yes. But honing our ability to recognize blessings can be especially helpful in our most difficult times. That's what a woman named Jean reported in an article she wrote earlier this summer. Jean's no one famous. Jean's husband had received a medical diagnosis that was both serious and not very hopeful. As he threw his energy toward treatment, Jean threw her energy to supporting him and to looking for what in her life she was grateful for. She was grateful for her husband's work which gave him such joy and fulfillment even during the challenges of chemotherapy. She took note of her gratitude for family friends, for their children, for a sunset, a flower blooming in the garden, seeing instances of people doing good things for other people. Her resolve to deepen her thankful outlook on life enabled Jean Trebek to appreciate that much more the time she had as her husband Alex – yes, Alex Trebek – battled pancreatic cancer until his death earlier this month.⁵

It's been said that "there are three ways to take a gift: It may be taken for granted, it may be taken with guilt or taken with gratitude."⁶ The man healed by Jesus took with gratitude the gift he was given. A good example for us as we prepare to celebrate a unique Thanksgiving holiday. It's going to be different, yes... and we can choose to make it "the best!"

⁴ Jeanette Levellie, "Simply the Best" in *Guideposts*, November 2020, 12

⁵ Jean Trebek, "Acceptance, Strength, Gratitude" in *Guideposts*, August 2020, 23.

⁶ https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=991