

## **Sermon: Give thanks in all circumstances**

Alison Li, Toronto United Mennonite Church, 13 October 2024

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” These are the words of Paul to the church at Thessalonica.

This weekend we mark Thanksgiving, a holiday that is celebrated officially and unofficially in many different cultures and countries around the world. Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island have long had traditions of giving thanks for not only for the bounty of nature but for the health of the community with celebrations that might last several days and include feasting and prayer, dance, potlatch and other ceremonies. This weekend, many of us will gather with friends and family and take the time to reflect on the blessings in our lives, the food on our tables, and the beauty of the natural world.

But what would it mean to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances?

The gospel reading for today tells us at the very beginning that Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee, and I think this hints to us that this is, in many ways, a story about boundaries and the things that divide.

If there is any theme that stands out in today’s news, that is the cause of so much strife, it is the question of borders, where they should be set, who belongs within and without, how they are guarded, defended and assailed. Where, to those who are privileged holders of welcome passports, a border is a minor obstacle, to the refugee and asylum-seeker, a border is a fearsome barrier. Borders are disputed, expanded, defended and fought over at tremendous human cost.

Here, Jesus of Galilee travels the border, disrupting assumptions and categories. Borders are liminal spaces, spaces that belong to both and neither, places of transition and transformation. Sometimes, they are where the impossible becomes possible.

In the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers, the most obvious divide is the one between the sick and the well. Leprosy, also known as Hansen's Disease today, is a chronic bacterial infection of the skin and nerves that, if left untreated, can lead to progressive and permanent debility. Leprosy has been with human-kind since ancient times, and because of its contagious nature, people affected by leprosy have been stigmatized and discriminated against. The good news is that today, it is a curable condition, and through global public health efforts, the world is moving towards its elimination.

But when the word leprosy is used in the Bible, it actually includes not only what we call leprosy in modern times, but probably a range of diseases. Scholars speculate that it might have included all sorts of conditions that cause a rash such as measles, small pox and scarlet fever.

For Jews at the time of Jesus, the guide to dealing with such skin ailments was the book of Leviticus which provides detailed rules for worship and ceremonial cleanliness. Physical perfection symbolized spiritual holiness, so there are elaborate rituals and sacrifices that are required to gain forgiveness of sins and to purify the body to make it acceptable for being in community and in God's presence. Priests were the arbiters of these rules. Anyone who developed a skin ailment was required to be brought before a priest who would carefully inspect the person's symptoms and, following detailed criteria laid out in Leviticus, decide whether the disease appeared to be contagious. If the ailment was found to be suspicious, the priest could order the person to be isolated for seven days, or more. This makes sense: in an age when no treatments were available for many of these illnesses, quarantine was the only way to prevent their spread in a community. If, after a period of isolation, the skin disease had resolved, a priest could inspect the condition and pronounce the person clean and they would be allowed to return to society. But, if someone was found to have what was called a defiling disease, one that made them in danger of defiling others, they were ostracized. They were required to go about wearing torn clothing, letting their hair grow unkempt and covering the lower part of their face. And when anyone

came near them, they had to cry out “Unclean! Unclean!” They were barred from community and left to live alone or only with others who were considered similarly unclean. They were cut off from social and spiritual fellowship. What a bitter fate this was, and how impassible the divide must have seemed that separated them from the rest of their people.

In the scripture passage we heard today, ten men who have been ostracized in this way approach Jesus. It seems that reports of his ministry have reached even to them. Everywhere they go, they are met with revulsion, dismay and fear of contagion. People turn their eyes away. These men keep at a respectful distance from Jesus, as was required of them by the law. But they are bold. They call out “in a loud voice, ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us!’” Notice that they don’t ask for Jesus to heal them. They ask for mercy; they place themselves in God’s hands.

From across this distance, Jesus says to them only “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” Across this divide, Jesus reaches out with deep compassion.

And then, without further clarification or discussion, in an act that shows remarkable faith, the ten men simply went! I imagine them a little confused at first. Did they look around at each other in puzzlement, trying to figure out what to do? Did they stumble? Maybe they begin to shuffle, then take one step, then another, faster and faster as hope blooms in their hearts, finally breaking out into a ragged run. Imagine the incredible wonder and shouts of joy that erupt as they go.

We know only that, as they went, they were cleansed. In the course of this journey, they have crossed that daunting divide between the sick and the well, the unclean and the clean.

For these ten men, though, this is just the beginning. If the priest examines them and declares them to be healed, then there will follow a further set of elaborate rituals involving cedar wood, a piece of scarlet yarn, and the herb hyssop that they must bring to the priest. Each one will also have to supply two birds, one which is to be sacrificed and the other which is to be released into the open fields. The person is

sprinkled seven times, then must bathe, wash their clothes, shave off all their hair and stay outside their tent for another seven days, after which there are further animal sacrifices. The priest will touch blood to their right ear lobe, their right thumb, and the big toe of their right foot, and then touch oil to these same places and finally pour oil on their head to make atonement for their sin. These rituals were a way of marking the person's passage from unclean to clean, from being socially dead to being returned to life.

They have crossed the border between the sick to the healthy, from unacceptable to acceptable. But I wonder what the future holds for these ten? I suspect this is only the beginning of an uncertain journey. What will they find when they return home? Will they be received with open arms by family members who have longed for their return? I certainly hope that is what they will find. But, after they have spent months perhaps years away, will some of them perhaps find their loved ones have fallen into poverty, or been lost to disease and death? That they have grown up, grown old, moved on with their lives?

And even if they are warmly received back into their community, will the suffering they themselves experienced have changed them and make it difficult for them to readjust to life as they knew it before?

There is another aspect that I find interesting about this story, and that is the divide between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans and Jews had a deep antagonism. Although these two groups had a common ancestry and scriptural tradition, they had branched away from each other hundreds of years before. Each group considered the other culturally foreign and religiously mistaken. Normally Jews did not associate with Samaritans whom they despised and regarded as unclean. But notice that among these ten people with leprosy, it appears there are both Jews and Samaritans; as outcasts, these people have been forced to form a new community of their own. In their outcast state, they have broken down barriers that usually divide them; they have struggled together and helped each other survive. So, as these ten men run back

towards their lives as healthy people, I wonder, do they leave behind the companionships that had sustained them through these terrible months and years, the ties of mutual support that just a day before had been so crucial to their survival? Is there something they lose as they gain?

Of course, the heart of this story is that just one of the ten who are healed, a Samaritan, turns back. He praises God in a loud voice, throws himself at Jesus's feet and thanks him. Jesus asks, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" This man, as we remember, is doubly an outsider, as both a Samaritan and a person with leprosy.

Then Jesus said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Here, as in several other stories in scripture, genuine faith and recognition of who Jesus is comes from an unlikely person. And moreover, genuine gratitude. It is this faith and gratitude that makes this person truly whole, not only healed in the flesh but restored to right relationship with God.

What surprised me is to find that this is the only instance in all of scripture where someone thanks Jesus! There are many other stories of Jesus performing miracles, feeding the hungry, healing the blind and lame. Some of those who are healed run off to share the news of Jesus's work, some of them praise God. In many of the stories, we simply don't hear what happens after. But nowhere else is there a report of anyone saying thank you to Jesus. This Samaritan, healed, is shown to be one person who recognizes that God is at work through Jesus and who takes the time to give thanks.

I want to thank Bob for his lovely Children's Story. It reminds us that at times it is easy to feel gratitude, when we feel abundance and joy welling up in our hearts. But other times, it is more difficult. And that is why gratitude is not just an emotion; it has to be a spiritual discipline.

Jesus's response to him shows that gratitude is simply our only appropriate posture with relation to God, our creator and source of all our blessings. Whatever

this man might face in the coming days and years, whatever the uncertainties of his life ahead, he has recognized that his first act, his foremost duty, the only true thing, is to give thanks and praise to God. Before action, before striving, before worrying and hurrying...gratitude.

It strikes me that we are like the ten, with our struggles large and small, the anxieties that churn in our hearts, the worries that wake us in the middle of the night, our joys, hopes, doubts and fears, our loneliness and loss, some of us bearing ancient wounds that have faded into pale scars or fresh ones that are red and raw, facing the uncertainties of a deeply troubled world. Mercy, we cry! And there, always there, is a God of infinite compassion, boundless love, who reaches across any distance to restore us to right relationship.

This Thanksgiving and every day, let us follow the example of the one who remembers first, before everything, to give thanks and praise.

**Thanks be to God.**

## **Psalm 100**

**A psalm. For giving grateful praise.**

**1** Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

**2** Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come before him with joyful songs.

**3** Know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his[a];  
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

**4** Enter his gates with thanksgiving  
and his courts with praise;  
give thanks to him and praise his name.

**5** For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;  
his faithfulness continues through all generations.

## **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.”