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Giving Thanks, Even When Life is Out of Control

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

On the last page of Luther's Small Catechism is a table grace. Ironically, Lutherans rarely pray it, but most Catholics have it memorized. It says, "Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord." Since Matt's family is Catholic, we enjoyed that this grace is in something held in common, and so for many years it was our most-used table grace. Now, the prayer leader chooses, and it is probably still our most-used grace, followed by a rather obnoxious version of the Johnny Appleseed Prayer, where the prayer-er begins with a long, loud, and off key OOOOOOOO to start "Oh the Lord is good to me."

The thing about the table grace, as a genre, is how they run counter to a world that says everything I have, I have by my own work. Instead the table grace says that whatever is on my table, whatever goodness is in my life, whatever blessings I have, they all come from God, not me. I have to confess, that I often get to the grace-saying part of dinner exhausted. I know that my effort is going to be met with a hastily eaten meal and the more-than-occasional turned up nose. Something has burnt, the milk has turned, yes, we're having roasted broccoli *again*. Yet, the table grace says that gratitude matters, that gratitude transforms even humble food into something more, that gratitude transforms us into something more. Yet this gratitude, this movement from "all by my hands" to "all by your hands, oh God," isn't only in table graces. It is for every moment when life feels out of our hands, out of our control.

But what about when there is little to be grateful for? What about when you're just getting by? What about when everything is swirling out of control?

For the lepers, life was out of control. For who knows how long, they'd lived on the margins of the society, warning anyone who approached that they were unclean, as

instructed in Leviticus. And, sure, when they heard that Jesus was nearby, they bent the rules every so slightly, instead of warning him away with shouts of “Unclean, unclean,” they called out a plea: “Mercy, mercy.” But then, they did—the nine lepers did, at least—exactly as they were told: Jesus told them to show themselves to the priests, and they did. It was probably 30, 35 miles to Jerusalem, a day or two by foot, but they went. And there’s no reason to think they weren’t cleansed in the end. God doesn’t withhold gifts, pulling back just as we reach for them asking-but-not-really-asking, “What do you sa-ay?” All ten lepers were cleansed. Though, even as it looks like they’re headed for a happy ending, it is still far from over. The priest would have to declare them clean—at least clean enough for the next step—when they would shave their heads, and sleep outside their homes for seven days. And then—if they were still clean—they would have to offer an expensive sin offering—even Leviticus’s option for those who were poor included a lamb and two birds. Which I have to imagine would be a struggle to afford, since they hadn’t been able to work in however long. Everything in this story is beyond their control—everything except turning back in gratitude. Gratitude doesn’t fix their world, doesn’t change what came before, but it changes them.

Which is, of course, true of our lives, too. The dominant message we receive is: follow the rules and you’ll be alright. But the reality is so much of life is beyond our control. How can any of us prepare for this, Beloved? We wear sunscreen, and still get melanoma. We get the mammogram year after year, and one day there’s still a lump. We worked hard, and still the RIF, the pink slip, lands on our desk. It’s not all right. Racism is not all right. Sexism is not all right. War is not all right. Mega storms and massive wildfires are not all right. We are not all right, Beloved. Everything, yes, everything is beyond our control. The message is: follow the rules and you’ll be all right. The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa has noted that modern life is all about making the world more available, accessible, useful, and controllable. But to do so requires “constant economic growth, technological acceleration, and cultural innovation” at the cost of alienating us “from the world, ourselves, and each other.” (See Note 1) Alienation is the cost of control, but gratitude...gratitude reconnects us to God, to each other. Gratitude shows us the world not as a possession to be controlled, but as a gift to be joyously received.

The message is: follow the rules and you’ll be all right. But if that were true wouldn’t Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...wouldn’t Jesus have been able to forego the cross and just follow the rules? But our faith isn’t speciality training to get our lives under our control. Our faith says is that there is something else at work among us, not control, but something that tells the truth about this world and the lies we’re told, something that makes us free, something that makes us joyous, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. The cross reveals that life in God isn’t about getting everything under control, it is about living in communion with God and one another, and gratitude is how we live into that communion.

In 1521, Martin Luther was hiding in Wartburg Castle, labeled a heretic, with a bounty on his head. Things were dire; things were out of control. Yet while at Wartburg, he wrote a

series of sermons to teach his theology, and, in one of them, he wrote that true worship is the tenth leper turning back. Luther writes, “The others go their way; only faith returns and gives thanks.” Worship, for Luther, was no longer about the priest getting every element just right, that, somehow, we might control God, and control our lives. For Luther, worship is gratitude, it is how our fear about our out of control lives is turned to trust that, though we may not understand how, we know God is in control, trust that we know from whom all blessings flow.

The Samaritans were descendants of refugees, whose ancestors fled when Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They were the children of mixed heritage, and those who considered themselves in the Southern Kingdom, faithful through exile, they treated the Samaritans with disdain. The Samaritans knew that most of life was well beyond their control. The other nine might be tempted to believe that everything was back under their control, and so they’ll live their lives, the tenth—the Samaritan, the foreigner—knows it never was, and returns in faith to Jesus.

The tenth leper’s return is the miracle of faith that may or may not transform our situation, may or may not transform our world, but it never neglects to transform us. At the center of our worship, we are invited to “give thanks to the Lord our God,” because it is indeed right, our duty, and our joy at all times and in all places to give thanks and praise to God who overcomes death and the grave, who conquers the out of control forces of our world, and offers us resurrected life today and forever. And in this meal, covered in our prayers of thanksgiving, bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. And in this meal, covered in our prayers of thanksgiving, the people gathered, too, are transformed into the body of Christ given for the sake of the healing of the world. Amen.

Notes:

Note 1: David Wood, “Hartmut Rosa says we’re running faster just to stay in place.” *The Christian Century*.