

Which of These Kids Is...?

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Texts: Luke 17: 11-19

God bless the internet. Not only can it do wonders for procrastination, it can be great for nostalgia too! As I was prepping my sermon yesterday, I went down an elephant-sized rabbit hole on YouTube and watched way too many old-school Sesame Street clips of a preschool guessing game they would air from time to time. It had its own catchy tune. Any guesses as to what I'm talking about? Picture it first: The screen is divided into four squares, three kids are doing one thing, and the fourth... Well, the song and game starts like this:

*“Three of these kids belong together
Three of these kids are kind of the same.
But one of these kids is doing his own thing
Now it's time to play our game...”*

Remember? Anyone? The song continues...

Which of these kids is doing his own thing?

Well...if only Luke had Sesame Street. Don't worry I'm not about to make up a leper version of the song but if you were listening to what Ahmaad just read, you can see where I'm going. Imagine it with me. It's not three kids in baseball uniforms awkwardly swinging bats and one in helmet and shoulder pads tossing a football. Instead, we start with ten people, all of whom are sick with an awful disease that would have left them feeling like they didn't belong anywhere. At first, our passage appears to be a straightforward healing story. They cry out for mercy. Jesus tells them to go and show the high priests and they are healed on the way, but that's just the start. All of a sudden nine of these healed children of God belong together. Nine are kind of the same! But one starts doing his own thing! One decides to return to Jesus and give thanks. If we were playing the game on Sesame Street, we'd hear **“if you picked him, you got the right answer.”** That's actually what they said after all that *suspenseful* singing and after they gave you time to think real hard about which one to choose. Gotta hand it to Sesame Street for celebrating difference and questioning what it means to “belong.”

Luke didn't have split-screen tv technology or wardrobe changes to draw out the differences, but I want us to note two things about how he tells the story that make this one person stand out from the others. First, Jesus describes him as a foreigner, a Samaritan – even before he was a leper, he knew something about not belonging. Second, we learn that this kid is the only one to disregard Jesus' own instruction! Jesus commands all ten: “Go to the priests!” In other words, go back to the institutional system that has turned you away and deemed you “unclean” for so long. That's a tall order! We can't be sure why Jesus sends them to the priests, but it seems he wanted them to make some kind of point. “Go show yourselves,” he says! Was it to show them how God's mercy is greater than their religious rules? Was it so that they could go and share their stories, advocate, and bring hope to other lepers? Whatever the case, the Samaritan turns back. He trusts his gut enough to risk not following Jesus' clear

exhortation! He's got chutzpah. He decides to return to Jesus, to lie down at his feet, and give thanks. Jesus is clearly impressed. He says: "Your faith has made you well!" In other translations, it's "your faith has saved you" or "your faith has made you whole!" Jesus exalts this outsider as an exemplar of faithful living!

So, what's going on here, really? What's the heart of the matter? Let's start with the 9 lepers and the first level of healing that occurs. They all acknowledge Jesus as Master. They all ask for mercy! Jesus gives it to them, eventually. But it was on their way to do something he asked of them, to go and show themselves to the priest. If you ask me, it all feels a little too transactional for the gospel, a little too give and take. Without the 10th leper, the story feels thin, almost incomplete. Is it that, as one commentator has noted, "their failure to thank Jesus reveals at best a sort of utilitarianism ("Well, that worked, didn't it?) or of entitlement at worst ("Well, I certainly deserved that.")?"¹ Gratefully, the first part of the story isn't the whole story!

Enter the audacious move by the Samaritan outsider who adds needed nuance and complexity. Somehow, he senses it too - the whole healing thing happened too fast! He's like "wait a minute! That's it! He says go, and we get healed, and we are on our way already to do God knows what?" He stops and says, "Not so fast!" He somehow knows that his relationship with God deserves more. It's about so much more than getting that long-hoped-for result. It's about more than something he had coming to him. It's about more than what he had to do next because Jesus asked him. He knows that faith is never so linear, cause and effect, or transactional. It's as if he's learned, perhaps the hard way from all his time living outside the fold, that in truth we are all beloved already and always, that we all belong already and always, and that nothing belongs to us anyway...not our health, or wealth, or status. He intuits from deep within that it's all a gift and so the only response? All honor, glory, thanks and praise to be God, from whom all blessing flow! Rather than dutifully following what Jesus told them, and being on the move to the next thing, he sinks in for a moment to his own relationship with the divine, prioritizes returning to God and Jesus above all else. He embodies a posture - literally - of thanks and praise to God. Jesus apparently sees this posture and practice as the very definition of faith itself. His bold gratitude has led him not only to healing, but to a deeper source and ongoing resource of genuine wellness, wholeness, and salvation itself!

My colleague and former div school roommate Matt Boulton offers a contemporary example that can help us understand this kind of gratitude. He writes: "The act of thanksgiving deepens and completes the act of receiving a blessing. Think of a child who receives a meal from her parents, a dish they've specially prepared for her as a gift: if she simply consumes it as fuel, or devours it as a privilege, or thoughtlessly enjoys it as an indulgence — in fact she misses the truth of her situation. She misses the gift. In that sense, she never actually receives the blessing, much less comes to believe in her blessedness. It's only when she genuinely perceives the meal as a gift, and genuinely thanks her parents for it, that she receives it as it is, and so may experience reality. Her thanksgiving is part and parcel of both her receiving and her believing that she is the beneficiary of her parents' love and care. In other

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, David L. Bartlett, *Feasting on the Word— Year C, Volume 4 Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*, Presbyterian Publishing Company, 2010.

words, thanksgiving is believing. Thanksgiving is the unmistakable sign of understanding that a gift has been given. Gratitude, not obedience, is the natural echo of grace.”²

Amen?

Methodist pastor Steve Garnas Holmes wrote a short poem on this passage that builds on these themes as well. He writes:

“Gratitude begins where entitlement leaves off.
Gratitude is not a feeling; it's a practice.
First be grateful, then see what you receive.
The more you practice gratitude for the little things
the more you experience life as an unexpected gift.
Keep this prayer always in your heart:
“For what I am about to receive, thank you.”

I'm guessing it was something like these practices of faith that so impressed Jesus from the Samaritan. And I wonder...how often do we miss the chance to turn in gratitude, to give praise to God, to abide in postures of faithful and ongoing relationship with our God, our font of every blessing! In contrast, how often do we get swept into our hyper-transactional culture and crowds of demands to keep moving on to the next thing we have to do. And here's a case where those instructions for what to do may be coming from Jesus, himself! This is tricky stuff, right?

I know many of you pretty well, and I know myself a good bit too, and when I'm being honest...I know we have some rich and powerful *moments* of healing, beauty, joy, challenge, and \in this community - whether in worship, small group connection, or shared acts of service! I know we take our end-of-service blessings seriously to go forth now and love and serve because you are the church! This community is full of people who I see getting up and going and showing God's love and mercy in ministries, paid or volunteer, serving, teaching, feeding, healing, caring, advocating and speaking truth to whatever institutional priests and power brokers that be. Many of us take “faith-in-action” seriously - but I can't help but wonder if our faith-in-action doesn't sometimes tend towards a more transactional, give-and-take, results-oriented efficiency, spreading us thin and leaving us and work feeling incomplete and less than whole, despite our best intentions. When does our faith and striving to do good, even for our dearest loved ones, become another task, another program, a next thing to do such that we are moving so fast - even when we are doing those things that Jesus wants us to do! Like the Samaritan, when we do need to stop, step away for a moment, and say hold on a minute, not so fast, aren't we forgetting something? How can we, and this one is not a rhetorical question, how *can* we build a regular practice into our daily lives of breaking away from the culture and crowd, of finding time *to do and have our own thing with God*. How can we return to abide in our own relationship with God, give thanks and praise, even imagine bowing at Christ's feet! We just sang it - what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! How do we let ourselves experience and give thanks for the privilege of being able to do just, not as a means to an end, but as a pure and simple good in and of itself!

A quick and hopefully timely story for before I close: I was in a small group conversation recently with an indigenous person and someone asked what they thought of land acknowledgments. They said

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/10/8/thanking-is-believing-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-eighteenth-week-after-pentecost>

something to the effect of - they're ok, they're helping I guess - but it feels like someone took my beloved grandmother's recipe that she made from ingredients in her garden and they just started mass producing and mass marketing it." A question I heard underneath his lament - for the sake of what? Is it really about honoring Indigenous persons and land and healing relationships, really? Or is it just a means to a different end of making descendants of colonizers feel better or like they are doing what they know what they should be doing! I realize it's a bit of a reach to impose this story on our healing story from today but...imagine it ...imagine tomorrow or every day we encounter "land acknowledgment" - imagine first, we slow down, we center our hearts in a grateful place, we give God thanks for the gifts of creation, for the land, which despite the beloved song, isn't your land or my land. We thank God for the chance to be alive at this moment of reckoning. We thank God for whatever gifts of new insight we may be about to receive and learn by opening ourselves to indigenous wisdom. It's not out of some drive to be woke or to do the right thing because someone told it's the right thing to do! Instead, it comes from a place of deep and faithful and grateful recognition, that it's all a gift, that we are all beloved, colonizer and indigenous, that at some level, we all belong, and that nothing belongs to us. Thanks, and praise be to the Creator. Yes, we are all becoming, too, and yes, we have a long way to go! But in our solemn reckoning with what is ailing us all right, on our forever journeys towards healing and wholeness, we can and should and must always give thanks for the gifts that we are, and the gifts that we are about to receive, including those gifts that keep on giving from all of our grandmothers and benevolent ancestors!

At some level, we can't get away from the tensions or the transactions! Indeed, we need the both/and message to affirm the Samaritan's faith and to get up and go, stumbling along the way as we surely with our earnest faith-in-action and sometimes stumbling into faith-as-transaction! I pray as we receive this word today, we can each carve out space to do our own thing with God, find our own ways to turn aside from our give-and-take, too-often transactional world, and simply abide in gratitude for our relationship with the divine ground of our being. Talk about a land acknowledgment!

God bless the kids who are doing their own thing! God bless those outsiders in our midst, and spiritual ancestors, who teach us practices and postures of unceasing gratitude. God bless those who return again and again to wonder love and praise and thanks! From that place of grace and gratitude, may we too get up, go and do likewise! Amen.