

“Thank You! You’re Welcome!”

Luke 17: 11-19

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I read an article a while back that said that our society had lost the habit of uttering the magic words, “please” and “thank you.” But I’m not sure that’s true. I think that there are about an equal number of people who do say those words as do not. I think it’s about 50-50.

But I do think that we don’t really pay much attention to what we are actually saying, and have some trouble meaning what we say. For instance, instead of saying “thank you,” people often say “got it.” Or “have a good one.” And in lieu of saying “no, thank you,” reactions such as “I’m good” are increasingly common. And those responses don’t seem to carry the same sentiment or conviction. They feel less invested, somehow.

And the response to a “thank you” is sometimes just as much a throwaway phrase. Like the phrase “No problem.” And I think that loses something – because that phrase gives the impression that what was done for you really didn’t matter that much, or really wasn’t worth much effort anyway. And the same goes for “Don’t mention it” which is really saying that you shouldn’t have said the thank you in the first place, or that saying thank you is just plain wrong.

I think the best phrase is still the old original one – “You’re welcome” – which turns a simple social grace into a relationship, a real act of shared pleasure and hospitality. You are welcomed into my world of family and friends.

I know what you’re thinking. What a nit-picking old curmudgeon! If that’s all he’s got to think about, then God help him – and us! And that’s probably true. But what I really want to talk about this morning is to suggest to you that **thank you** is one of the most significant and powerful things a person can say. I’m talking about what you discover, and who you become, when you develop the habit of saying thank you.

Today’s gospel reading starts out looking like a story about healing. Ten lepers approach Jesus, saying “**Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!**” Jesus sends them to the priests, and as they go, they are made clean. In this story, Jesus is on the borderlands of Galilee and Samaria, and he tells the lepers to go and see the priests, who almost all lived down near Jerusalem. That’s a long journey. And, they were healed **on the way**.

And then we get to the second part of the story. Only one of the lepers, a Samaritan, comes back to say thank you. When he does, Jesus tells him, “**Your faith has saved you.**” All ten of the lepers are healed; only one of them is saved.

All ten of the lepers get to live their lives free from social stigma, discrimination, and exclusion. Only one of them gets to enter the company of Jesus.

For nine of the lepers Jesus is just a means to an end. For only one of them is Jesus an end in himself. And the key to the difference between that one leper and the other nine lies in those two simple words: **thank you.**

By saying thank you, that one leper was in effect saying: “**This is fundamentally a story about God. I have been healed because God chose to reveal his power in me.**”

When we are reflecting on our lives, do we judge them on how much we have achieved, or how many people love us, or how much stuff we possess? Or do we judge our lives on whether they are the kind of lives in which the glory of God has been revealed?

The curious thing is that the glory of God isn't only revealed in lives of accomplishment and success. The glory of God is often revealed in lives that are broken and have big holes in them. So, when we say thank you to God, it isn't something we do when we've been given lots of success, lots of love, or lots of stuff. It's to recognize that we've been given lives in which the glory of God can be revealed. The Samaritan leper had such a life. So can we.

And if we have been given lives in which the glory of God can be revealed, that means that we have been given a part to play in God's story. And the way you get to be part of this story is quite simple. It's to praise God and say thank you. When we praise God and say thank you, we recognize that life may not have been this way at all. It could well have been very different for us. God could have chosen **not** to create the world. God might **not** have created human beings. God might **not** have come in Jesus and saved us from our sins. God might **not** have sent his Holy Spirit to empower the church. It could well have been a very different story. There might not have been a place for you. There might not have been a place for any of us. And the way we recognize that things might have been very different lies in saying those two words: **thank you.**

Of course, we tend to forget the big picture and focus on the smaller details. We take our world and our existence for granted. And we concentrate on the parts that seem to go wrong. We think that our family isn't as happy as other families, and we wonder why, and we look for someone to blame.

We sometimes feel that we are isolated and hurting at a level of pain or hurt that is so much greater than anyone else's, and we feel that no one else could possibly know what we are feeling or experiencing. To a life that is mired in unresolved anger or resentment, gratitude is a stranger. But the only medicine for a life that is turned in on itself is rediscovering the art of saying thank you.

When he said thank you, the Samaritan leper entered a whole new community. And he was astonished and joyful and full of thanks for being made part of God's story in Jesus. He turns out to be a part of the people who respond to God and in whom the glory of God is revealed. He becomes a part of the community of Jesus.

It's an interesting company of people to join. You and I come to church to join the company of people in whom the glory of God is revealed. You can become one of those people by learning to say the words **thank you**. When you say thank you to the person who serves you food; or to the person who holds the door open for you; or to the person who notices you're limping and helps you; or to the person who handles your groceries through the checkout – in this small way you're recognizing that, like God, this person has made you part of a bigger story – a story in which people are overwhelmed not by what they've suffered, but by what they have received. To say thank you is to recognize your dependence on another person.

And to say thank you is slowly, gradually, to become powerful. You become the person who is so filled with awe and wonder with the life and grace you have been given that no suffering or cruelty or manipulation or misunderstanding or tragedy can break your spirit. You become the person who, in the face of horror and scarcity, can see beyond it. And nothing can destroy that person.

Martin Rinckert was the pastor in the small German town of Eilenberg in 1618, just as the slaughter and chaos of the Thirty Years War was beginning. This was a period so catastrophic that the population of Germany fell from 16 million to 6 million in just 30 years.

Now, Eilenberg was a walled city, and it also became a crowded haven for all sorts of refugees. And, to top it all off, in 1637, there was a terrible plague that ravaged Europe. Martin was the only pastor who remained alive in Eilenberg. He conducted 4000 funerals in that year!

Finally, in the 1640s, the famine, slaughter, and plague began to recede. Martin, who had lost half of his family, including his wife, could have been forgiven for feeling resentful and angry. Instead, he grieved and sat with God – exhausted by what he had experienced and what he had to do. And then he sat down and wrote the words to the hymn, which in English we know as **Now thank we all our God**.

In the midst of the horrors he witnessed, Martin nonetheless saw the ultimate grace of God, which had given him life, had given him Jesus, had given him hope, and still gave him faith. And, he did the simple thing, and just said thank you.

Martin Rinkart was a person in whom the glory of God was revealed – through his ability and his willingness, even amid untold suffering, to say thank you to the God of wonder and glory – who created us all, who suffers in our suffering, and who alone can raise us to new life.

May we too learn to say thank you, in great ways and small ways. And may we too become people in whom the glory of God is revealed. May we discover the power of a thank you. And when we are thanked, may we respond “You’re welcome.” You are welcome into my world. Amen.