

## Gratitude

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
at Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan  
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## Scripture

Luke 17:11-21

## Sermon

Lately people all over the world have been quarantined. Because of coronavirus. In hospitals. At military bases. On cruise ships. Nobody wants to be quarantined. It cuts you off from everyday life. It cuts you off from family and friends. It cuts you off from home.

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If you do have to be quarantined, I suppose it's better to be quarantined with other people rather than to be alone. It's not good to be alone. So it's no wonder, really, that it's ten lepers who call out to Jesus. Their disease cuts them off from the rest of the world. But they have found each other. So they aren't alone.

WHAT'S MORE, THIS GROUP OF TEN IS A MIXED GROUP. It's a time when Jews and Samaritans don't have much use for each other. But on the borderland between Galilee and Samaria, leprosy has the power to bring Jews and Samaritans together. The ten of them have found companionship in their common misery. And from their misery, they call out to Jesus: "Jesus, master, have pity on us!"

And that's all it takes. Jesus sees them, and he does have pity. Across the distance, he calls back to them: "Go, show yourselves to the priests."

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You see, anyone who recovered from a skin disease had to have the recovery verified by a priest. After that, the person could rejoin the community. So if someone were healed of leprosy, to the priests would be the first place to go.

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Jesus tells the ten men to go to the priests. But they haven't been healed yet. And the men start walking. But they haven't been healed yet. It's all a matter of trust. It's trust that sets things in motion. Jesus trusts the Father enough to send the men to the priests. And the men trust Jesus enough to go.

And on the way—no ritual prayers, no physical contact, no washing in the Jordan River seven times—on the way, out of nowhere, the disease loosens its grip on the men. They're cured. Hallelujah!

THE STORY COULD END THERE. But it doesn't. Because one of the men, after visiting the priests—I'm sure he did that first—he goes back to Jesus. He goes back, praising God with every step he takes. He goes back, and he walks right up to Jesus. Because he doesn't need to keep his distance any more. He's been cured. The priests have verified it. So he walks right up to Jesus and thanks him.

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Now this isn't a formal requirement that the man is meeting. Going to the priests, that's a formal requirement. It's what you have to do to be welcomed back into the community. But there's no formal requirement for him to say thank you.

I suppose that's why the other nine don't bother with it. No doubt they're thrilled to be cured, thrilled to be welcomed home. No doubt they're at least quietly praising God for saving them. But that one man sees Jesus and God together. That's why he goes back. That's why he thanks Jesus. Because there would have been no cure for him without Jesus. So he's grateful to Jesus, grateful for what Jesus has done.

AND THERE'S MORE GOING ON HERE THAN PHYSICAL HEALING. There's more going on than being welcomed home. Beyond all that, this one man recognizes the Kingdom of God. And when the Kingdom of God dawns on you, the only way to respond is with gratitude. Gratitude that you're able to see the Kingdom. And especially, gratitude that you're able to see Jesus as the key to the Kingdom. That's why the one man falls on his face before Jesus. Gratitude.

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Now, I know, on the surface this looks like it's just a story about ten men with leprosy. But there's more to it than that. It's a story about the coming of the Kingdom of God. And in case we don't recognize that in the story itself, it's there in the very next episode.

SOME PHARISEES ASK JESUS WHEN THE KINGDOM WILL COME. It's always the "when" question, isn't it? Because waiting is the hardest part. And in this sad world, this world of virus outbreaks and conspiracy theories—in this sad world, it seems like we're always waiting, waiting for the Kingdom.

Whether we're Pharisees or followers of Jesus, we want to see the Kingdom of God. At the same time, whether we're Pharisees or followers of Jesus, we're sure we'll recognize the Kingdom when we see it. But Jesus says, "The Kingdom won't look like what you expect. In fact, the Kingdom is already here, if only you could see it." Hmm.

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Do you know the official motto of the state of Michigan? "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you." As mottoes go, it's a pretty good one. It's an invitation to open our eyes right where we're standing and to notice the beauty that's all around us.

Now, I suppose someone could say, "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, go to Cape Cod." Or, "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, go to San Francisco." But if you're already in Michigan, the answer is to stay right where you are and to look around you. Because, no matter what side of the bridge you're on, the pleasant peninsula is right here. We're living in the middle of it!

THAT'S WHAT JESUS TELLS THE PHARISEES. And he tells them repeatedly: "Tax collectors, prostitutes, and 'sinners,' of all people—they're welcoming the Kingdom. Why aren't you?"

In this episode, a Samaritan, of all people, with leprosy, no less—that makes him a double-outsider!—yet he recognizes the Kingdom. You can tell, because he comes and bows before the King. And he thanks the King for saving him—and not just from leprosy.

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The Samaritan man, the outsider, is an "above and beyond" example. All ten men are healed. They're healed because of their faith, because at some level they trust in Jesus. But only the Samaritan man comes back to show gratitude to Jesus. And when he does, he receives an "above and beyond" measure of God's grace. Because Jesus speaks over him a word of blessing and new life.

JESUS SAYS, "GET UP AND GO; YOUR FAITH HAS MADE YOU WELL." And he's talking about more than physical healing. He's talking about a deeper kind of deliverance.

Jesus says, "Get up." And it's the same word that's used for resurrection. And here's something I say every Easter: resurrection is not about a dead person coming back to life. No. Resurrection is about a dead person beginning a brand new life.

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In this case, Jesus frees the Samaritan man from disease and from the quarantine of an imposed social distance. Then he does more. He welcomes him to live the brand new life of the Kingdom of God. And he welcomes him to start living it now. Because the Kingdom is wherever the King is. And the King is Jesus.

So if you seek the Kingdom of God, look about you. Look about you and see. The Kingdom is where Jesus is. The Kingdom is wherever people are welcoming Jesus in faith and responding to him with gratitude.

THE PRISON CHURCH IS AN OBVIOUS EXAMPLE OF THIS. Society treats prisoners like lepers. Prison itself is about an imposed social distance. It's the law. You prisoners are removed from the community. You're locked away to keep the rest of us safe. Because we don't want to catch whatever you might spread. So you're quarantined. You're cut off from friends and family, far from home.

But that doesn't stop you from calling out to Jesus, does it? And when you say, "Lord, have mercy!" . . . Well, that's all it takes. Jesus sees you, even when society has hidden you out of sight. Jesus hears you, even when society has locked the door on you. And Jesus saves you. And he keeps on saving you. And it keeps happening, day after day. Hallelujah!

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So, if anyone on the outside ever wonders where the Kingdom is, if anyone on the outside ever wants to see the Kingdom . . . All they have to do is come to the prison church. All they have to do is look around. If they do that, they'll find you praising God and giving thanks to Jesus. Because even in prison, God has set you free. And for that, you are grateful!

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Glory and thanks be to God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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