

The Continuing Story... According to Luke  
"An Invitation to Give Thanks" -- Luke 17:11-19 --

Everyone seems to have a favourite. I am my parent's favourite at least that's what I keep telling them. But when it comes to God and God's "abundance" God doesn't appear to be too choosy nor does God seem to have favourites. In fact, you could say God's abundance stretches to all, even to a group of lepers in first century Palestine. We don't know, but we can assume, the ten lepers in our story knew one another, knew one another well. Although our passage doesn't tell us, we can rightly imagine they lived together, begged together, wished they could be healed together. At one time they probably didn't know the other existed. My guess is that they never gave one another the time of day, even though they may have lived in the same village and walked by one another in the local market. But all that soon changed. Because of something they had no control over, they shared a terrible disease. Chances are it came upon them all in a very small and insignificant way. Maybe it was a constant tingling in their legs which later made its way to their arms. They began to stumble about, like you would do when you have sat for a long time – so long in fact – that your leg falls asleep and you find it awkward to just walk. Chances are some may have fallen into a fire and burned themselves because of their stumbling. Others, because of their numbness, didn't realize they had contracted an infection and by the time they had sought help it was too late so they lost a portion of a finger or an entire leg. Word spread quickly and then the diagnosis no one wanted to hear (because of the devastating consequence) "I'm sorry but you have leprosy." The result? You would have to leave your family and all that was familiar to go and live on the outskirts of town in a "leper colony" with others who shared your disease, lest you infect others. You would spend your nights living under the stars and your days wandering together with your fellow sufferers like a pack of wild animals relying upon the generosity of strangers to feed you because by this to your family you were (to coin a phrase from *The Princess Bride*), "mostly dead." It was truly a sad existence. I say, "existence" because this could not be considered a "life." Their only hope was for healing but most had given up on hope years

before. But every once in awhile rumours would spread, even as far as these leper communities. A new cure, a special healer, a unique prayer could maybe help. We're not sure how these sorry excuses heard about Jesus. Maybe a family member, a wife of one of the leprous men, had sneaked into to see her husband, (the man she promised to stay with for "better or worse,") in the middle of the night so no one would accuse her of having leprosy and tell her husband about a man she had heard about who had done some pretty dramatic healings and maybe he come and heal him. He wanted to believe his wife. But how could he? He had been this way for so long now he knew he was never going to be like he was. He thanked her and she left. He must have thought about it all night. It must have even given him a little hope because I believe the next day at breakfast he told his friends about this "Jesus" character. Some may have laughed, at least at first. But in time hope spread within them like a wildfire. They could have even agreed on what they would say when they saw Jesus. Some may have even begun praying that they could see him soon because they believed that Jesus could do for them what he had done for others. I say they "believed" because when they finally met Jesus "they" (not just one) but "they" called out saying, "Jesus, Master have mercy upon us." (Lk 17:13) Now you may think "mercy" here means relenting from further punishment (as if anything could be worse) or "mercy" meaning to display care by giving another something to eat or sharing a word of hope. But this is not what the lepers were calling out for. In their cries the lepers were asking Jesus for "mercy" as in "grace" or to do something that they did not deserve. Although not stated, it is certainly implied that the lepers were asking for "healing" because deep down they knew this Rabbi Jesus could do it. The mention of "going to see the priest" reinforced that God was going to act (not already – but going to) and display His abundance so with this fact in their back pocket the ten lepers headed for the Temple. This was quite a move, if you think about it. Lepers were not permitted near the Temple because of their lack of cleanliness and they knew this. To go the Temple would mean risking a result far worse than even than leprosy because if people like the Pharisees saw them in Town they would have the legal right and obligation to

stone these men without trial. But even with this knowledge the lepers went on their way and on the way they were “made clean.” I don’t claim to know what all of this looked like. I don’t know if disfigured body parts suddenly grew back or whether feeling in their hands and feet was suddenly restored. All Luke tells us they were “healed.” All we can assume is that they experienced our Abundant God!

Place yourself in the story for a moment, I mean following the healing. What would you do? Can we assume some of the healed lepers quickly ran to the Temple to show themselves to the Priests just as Jesus had instructed them to do? Did others immediately head in another direction (the direction of their homes) to kiss their wives and embrace the children they had not held in years? Our passage doesn’t tell us what nine of them did. We’re only told what they did not do. We only hear about what ten percent of the group, the one person healed did. Luke tells us only one “turned and praised God with a loud voice” and then “fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.” (Lk 17:15-16) One is thankful and nine were not? Really? Is that the real lesson of our story? Ten become known as the “thankless ones” and it’s easy for preachers like me to focus on them so we can say, “And don’t become like them!” We feel we are justified in doing this because even Jesus asks the one lone “thankful” leper, “Where are (the others)?” (Lk 17:17) Where are those who joined you in their healing? Why did they not return? Jesus is livid. He begins to yell at the nine, even chasing after them, one by one. If you read on a little further you will find the story of Jesus entering the village where the men ran to and one by one Jesus confronts them. He receives, “Thank-you’s” but none were true thank you’s from the heart so immediately Jesus touches them and the leprosy returns. The nine are left dumbfounded and return to living on their own and begging for food. Children are taught by their parents of the importance of saying, “Thank you” and the result if you forget. If you’re thumbing for the second part of this story in Luke you can stop now because that’s not how the story goes. There is nothing about how thankless people receive less than thankful people. There is nothing about the leprosy

coming back because the nine didn't say, "Thank you." Deep down we wish it would have happened this way because we would love to tell our children "that" story when we feel they are thankless plus it would also make things in life much "fairer." But that's not how God works. God is abundant to all! We serve an abundant God. We follow a God who gives not because anyone deserves it but because God is God and at his core is abundance. God knew only one would return to give thanks and yet God showered his abundance on all ten. You and I are recipients of God's abundance. But so is your neighbour who has nothing to do with the church. And so is your colleague who hates God. God is a God of abundance. All ten experienced this but only one knew of God's abundant blessing.

Our un-named paradigm of thankfulness came back to Jesus to offer his thanks following the healing. Some would say it was because his Momma had taught him right. She was the mother who after giving her a son a cookie would say, "And what do you say?" Or after coming home from a sleepover she would ask her daughter, "Did you remember to say, "Thank you to your host." Some would say that's how we get our children to become thankful. It's about repetition, it's about reminding. And I can't disagree. I've told you the story before about friends of ours whose son (as a little boy) would stand by the stove when his mother was baking cookies and not say, "Can I have one?" but "Thank-you!" "Thank-you!" Thank-you!" He said thank-you even before he received the cookie because he knew it was coming but even more he knew where it was coming from. Jesus says to the man who returned to say, "Thank-you" "Your faith has made you well." (Lk 17:19) Jesus doesn't say this to the nine. But what difference does it make? Were not all ten "made well?" Yes, but the "one" received something more. I know what you are thinking, "What could be "more" than healing from leprosy?" The one, only one, received not just the God's abundance but God's abundant blessing. Faith in this situation was the recognition that our leprous friend knew where this abundance had come from. Faith (in this story) was the understanding that God is the one who brings healing. To the others

healing came from “Rabbi Jesus” but to the one it came directly from God. To some healing comes from the doctors, or the treatment or the cutting edge medicine but to other it comes from God. To some the abundance they receive comes from their skill, their hard work, a few lucky breaks but to others the blessing comes from God. You may say, “What does it matter?” In the end were not all ten healed? It matters because those who forget or who cannot accept abundance from God alone hold onto things much tighter than those who know where things come from. And when you are holding tightly you can release it. And if you can not release it you miss the blessing. The one who came back to say, “thanks” not only received healing of his body but healing of his spirit as well – a new awareness that God is abundant.

If you can claim that all things come from God, if you believe God is abundant then you have faith and you are well on the way to receiving abundant blessing. Not blessing, as we now know, of receiving anything more than anyone else but recognizing from where it comes from. “Gratitude,” as one theologian once put it, “follows grace like thunder follows lightning.” When we know our abundant God thankfulness becomes as natural as breathing, especially when faith is present. Awareness, deep awareness, of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God, is the only thing I know of that can elicit unrestrained thankfulness and generosity. Guilt won't do it. Slick stewardship messages won't do it. Shame won't do it. Charts won't do it. Letters won't do it. Sermons won't even do it. Awareness, deep awareness, of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God – that will do it. That's what motivated our leprous friend to run back and run to the feet of Jesus. The same invitation is before us – to participate in recognizing our Abundant God! and then receiving God Abundant Blessing! But I feel like I would be remised to tell you that the blessing is not always about us (that is about faith) but also about **being** abundant blessings because the more we have the more we want to give away – and the more we want others to know and experience what an Abundant God we serve! Abundant God! Abundant Blessings!