

HEALED BY THANKFULNESS

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19; Luke 17:7-10

When working with couples preparing for marriage, I often give them a worksheet called “Strengths of Our Relationship.” On the sheet I ask them to write down five characteristics of the other person they most respect and five actions of the other person they most appreciate. This is usually hard for them to do. They think of one or two right away, but five is a stretch. When they finally come up with five actions they appreciate, I am often impressed by their simplicity. They say things like, “I appreciate it when he fixes dinner.” “I appreciate it when she cleans my apartment.” “I appreciate it when he takes my car in for servicing.”

I have never done this, but I would love to ask the same question of couples who have been married 20 or 30 years. I wonder how many of them would mention fixing dinner or cleaning or taking the car in for servicing. It isn't that people quit doing these things after 20 years. It is just not noticed anymore. What starts out as an unexpected gift becomes something assumed, taken for granted.

Expectations and gratitude are the key to both of our scripture readings this week. Take a pew Bible and look with me at Luke 17:7-10 (NT, 80). In verse 7 Jesus says, “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table?’”

Now let me ask a question. Who of you here would not love to come home from a long day at work and have someone greet you at the door and say, “Here, take off your coat. Sit down and relax. I've got dinner all ready.”? The problem, of course, is that the other person has also been working all day, outside the home or maybe inside the home taking care of children, which can be harder than tending sheep. The other person would also like to be told, “Sit down and relax. I've got dinner all ready.”

The fact is we would love to be greeted that way, but we know better than to expect it. And that is Jesus' point. No slave would expect such special treatment from a master, so what makes you think you should expect such special treatment from God? Look at verse 10. Jesus says, “So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are only worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.’” Do you see what relationship Jesus is talking about here? He is talking about our relationship to God. He is saying, “When you have done all that God tells you to do, when you have obeyed all of God's commandments and served in all the ways God wants you to serve, you still have no special claim on God's blessing.”

I think most of us, deep down, expect special treatment from God. If we are nice, if we join the church, if we are reasonably decent, kind human beings, then we expect God to help us out when we need it. Isn't that why we get angry at God when things don't go well? When tragedy strikes or illness or unemployment, we wonder why God let this happen. We feel disappointed with God. We figure that God owes us better treatment than that, as if God should be waiting for us with dinner ready.

The philosopher Voltaire, who was known for being somewhat cynical, once said, “God forgive us, because it is his job.” Now that is the ultimate in presumption: God owes us forgiveness, God owes us healing, God owes us blessing, as if God is here for our benefit, not we for God’s.

At this point I think the parable Jesus tells in verses 7-10 can help us understand the story that follows in verses 11-19. Jesus heals ten men with leprosy. We are not told much about them except that one of them is a Samaritan. We assume that the other nine were Jews, part of the chosen people of God. If so, they probably reacted to their illness the same way we would. They say to themselves, “Why me? I’m a religious person. I believe in God. I go to church. I read my Bible and pray and give to charity. Why did God let this happen to me?”

Leprosy was a terrible disease in the ancient world. It would be like having bird flu. People were terrified of catching it. You would have to separate yourself from your family, your neighborhood, your co-workers, and your friends. That is why the ten lepers had to keep their distance from Jesus. The only people with whom you could associate were other people with the same disease. This may explain why this group was a mixture of Jews and Samaritans. Normally Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans, but when you’ve got a horrible disease that isolates you from everyone else, you take your friends wherever you can find.

I suspect there was a little bitterness in the lives of those nine Jewish lepers. Wouldn’t you be bitter if God stood by and allowed you to suffer a horrible disease that not only wasted your body but separated you from every important person in your life? When those nine Jewish lepers were healed, I am sure they were glad. But I suspect they also wondered why God gave them this disease in the first place. They may have even felt a little like Voltaine: God healed them because God owed it to them.

The Samaritan was a different story. I doubt that the Samaritan expected Jesus to heal him. Jesus was a Jew, and Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. The Samaritan may have cried out for healing along with his fellow sufferers, but I doubt he expected to be healed, especially when Jesus told them to go and show themselves to a priest. The Samaritan would not have been welcomed in the presence of a priest. When Jesus told them to go and show themselves to a priest, the Samaritan thought Jesus was talking to the other nine lepers—the Jewish lepers. He never dreamed that Jesus might actually heal him, too.

Do you now see the connection between our two scripture readings? There is a connection between expectation and gratitude. When couples first begin dating, everything is a gift. “You made dinner for me? Wow, thank you.” “You took my car in for servicing? Wow, thank you.” Later they will say, “What took you so long?” But in the beginning they are grateful for everything, because it is all an unexpected gift.

Now we come to the end of the story. Only the Samaritan comes back to thank Jesus. Only the Samaritan realizes that health is not his birthright from God; it is a gift. But then Jesus says something surprising to him. Verse 19: “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’”

What does Jesus mean by that? Weren't the other nine also made well? What has the Samaritan received that the other nine did not receive?

The Greek word Jesus uses in verse 19 is not the ordinary Greek word for healing. It is the ordinary Greek word for being saved. Let me give some examples. In Luke 7 a notoriously sinful woman comes to Jesus and weeps at his feet. Jesus says to her, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace." The Greek word Jesus uses in that statement is the same Greek word Jesus speaks to the Samaritan leper in Luke 17. In Luke 9:24 Jesus uses the same word when he says, "Those who lose their life for my sake will save it." Jesus uses the same Greek word again in Luke 19:10 when he says, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost." In that last verse Jesus is referring to Zacchaeus, the short tax collector. Zacchaeus was not sick; he was well enough to climb a sycamore tree. Zacchaeus wasn't sick, he was separated; he was alienated from God and from other people. So was the sinful woman. Jesus is not talking in these verses about physical healing. He is talking about being saved. He is talking about having a new relationship to God that can last forever.

So when Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Your faith has made you well," he is really saying, "Your faith has saved you. Your faith has given you a new relationship to God." In his gratitude the Samaritan experienced not just healing but a whole new relationship to God—a relationship based not on expectation or disappointment or bitterness, but on unexpected grace and surprised joy.

There is a connection between grace and gratitude. Only those who experience life as a gift will be grateful, and only those who are grateful will experience life as a gift. That applies to the gift of your spouse, and it also applies to the new life you have been given by God through Jesus.

- Ken Onstot