

October 9, 2022

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“A Reversal toward Gratitude”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Luke 17:11-19

Giving thanks to God is important. Yet this is not just a story about good etiquette that reminds us to say, “thank you.” The power of this story is both in the gratitude *and* in the Samaritan, of all people, offering it. Those two things together demonstrate the great reversal and the great faith that Jesus praised. As the commentator says, “Thanking is believing—or, to put it another way, thanksgiving is the unmistakable sign of understanding that a gift has been given. Gratitude, not obeisance or obedience, is the natural echo of grace.”

The Samaritan showed faith through his active, joyful gratitude offered to God. “Your faith has made you well,” Jesus said. Wellness here means something like salvation and shalom—wholeness, peace, and goodness, in this life and in the life to come. It was not the act of thanking by itself that led him to that salvation. It was the messy and wonderful combination of a person in need receiving God’s grace, recognizing it, and responding in gratitude. That is a basic description of our own faith—grace freely given, recognition, responding in gratitude.

Brandon’s family recognized the grace that had happened to them through their child’s interpretation of the signs. His mom, Sheletta, responded in gratitude. She wrote a children’s book, called *Brandon Spots His Sign*, about her son’s experience to encourage other children with autism. Their story is also a reminder about the unexpected reversals God so often shows us. These days, we are hesitant to learn from those we disagree with; we draw back from those we consider to be our adversaries when it comes to politics or social issues. Brandon’s story, and the story of the leprous Samaritan turned faithful follower, remind us to look deeper at those we have written off, those we’ve decided cannot possibly teach us anything about grace. God is still reaching out to us, even through people like that. So we may indeed receive holy, unexpected gifts through them. If we have eyes to see those gifts and courage enough to respond, then we may be moved to praise God with a loud voice, too. We may find our own faith renewed, our own salvation assured, as we remember to give God thanks.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

Brandon Brundidge is nine-years-old. Brandon has autism. This spring, his family drove in their RV from Minnesota down to Texas to enjoy the warmer weather. The trip meant there were a lot of new experiences and decisions for Brandon, and often, that was a hard thing to deal with. Was he ready to take the training wheels off his bike? Was he brave enough to jump in the big, outdoor pool? Did he want to explore some of the sights at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo? It could be a little overwhelming when he thought about it.

But on the trip down to Texas, Brandon saw the signs. He saw them at the RV park once they arrived, too. They said, “Let’s go Brandon” in red, white, and blue. Some of you probably know what that seemingly innocuous phrase means these days. “Let’s Go Brandon” has become a coded way of hurling a vulgar expletive at the president of the United States. The origins are a bit confusing, being tied to a NASCAR race last year. To understand the story today, all you really need to know is that the phrase “Let’s Go Brandon” is meant to be mean.

But that’s not the way young Brandon Brundidge saw it. One morning after they’d arrived, Brandon’s mom, Sheletta, saw him strutting around the RV park like he owned the place. She wondered what had gotten into her son. What was making him feel so brave all of a sudden? When she asked him, he told her just to look at the signs! “These are my fans. They know me. They love me.”¹

Nine-year-old Brandon thought everyone was cheering him on when they put out their “Let’s Go Brandon” signs. He felt encouragement and support, though the signs were intended as anything but. Perhaps it’s like Joseph said to his brothers at the end of Genesis, “you meant evil against me, but God intended it for good.”

Throughout Luke and in our specific passage today, *reversal* is a prominent theme. A person’s economic or social status starts out as isolated, marginalized, even condemned. And then, because of an encounter with

1 AJ Willingham, “How an author, a NASCAR star and a young boy flipped ‘Let’s Go Brandon’ on its head,” July 17, 2022, CNN.

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

Jesus, their situation is reversed. Through Jesus, they find restoration, wholeness, salvation. Something like the reversal Brandon experienced, from fear and trepidation, to bravery and boldness. Something like the reversal the lepers experienced, from being ostracized to being restored to health and wholeness.

At the beginning of this story, there are ten people with leprosy, who start out isolated and oppressed. Leprosy comes up a lot in the Bible. The term probably encompassed lots of skin diseases and other conditions. Having leprosy in that time meant that a person was put out of their home and community. They had to call out to warn others they were approaching, as these men were doing, so that people could steer clear of them. Leprosy tried to extinguish a person's dignity, telling them they were worthless. Though the disease started out as a physical issue, its toll on a person's life hit just as hard in the spiritual and emotional realms. Occasionally, lepers were healed or their condition improved. It was not a resolution of symptoms that let them regain a normal life, though. Rather, only through a visit to the priest were they declared clean, healed, and restored.

In response to the lepers' cries for mercy, Jesus did not touch them in order to heal them. He didn't speak any words that deemed them healed. Instead, he told them to go and show themselves to the priest—to the one who could declare them recovered and restore them to the community. Hearing this, they turned on their heels, and headed for the priest. They obeyed Jesus. And on the way to the priest, it seems they looked down to realize that their bodies had been healed; the skin lesions were gone. The proper thing would have been to continue the journey to the priest, just as Jesus had said. That is how they would have regained their lives and recovered their dignity.

Nine of them did just that. But upon noticing his body healed, one person turned back. Perhaps in astonishment, perhaps to lay his eyes again on the person who had changed his life, he turned to go back in the other direction. He delayed the moment when the priest would declare him well. He delayed the time when he could return home and embrace his mother and father again. As the SALT Commentary says, "the Samaritan rather boldly *disobeys* Jesus' instruction. Instead of going to see the priests, he pivots and returns, praises God, and thanks Jesus. Despite his years of ostracization and keeping his distance, he has the audacity to approach Jesus directly, to throw himself at his feet in thanksgiving. And for this impertinence—Jesus exalts him as an exemplar of faith."²

The encounter with Jesus caused a reversal in the man's life. He went from ostracized outsider to a person able to be part of his community

and family once again. This reversal alone is unexpected. But it's not the only surprising reversal. There is also the matter of this man's religion and culture. This man was not only a leper, but also a Samaritan. Samaritans were the hated enemies of Jews. The people traveling with Jesus expected that if anyone stopped to give thanks, it would be a Jewish person, not a backward, foreigner from Samaria.

Many of us are familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan, where we often reflect on the hatred and suspicion shared between Jews and Samaritans at the time. In that story, too, we're surprised when it was the Samaritan, not the Jewish religious leaders, who helped the man who'd been attacked on the side of the road. As Jesus encountered the lepers, we are just as astonished that it was the Samaritan who praised God and offered his utter gratitude to Jesus. It's another reversal. And it causes us to wonder what other reversals God might have in mind among us. What person or people do we least expect to demonstrate God's grace to us and how might God be ready to surprise us?

It was the Samaritan's act of gratitude and praise that makes this story so significant. Without the gratitude, it's just a regular healing story; a reversal of fortune, yes, but nothing to write home about. Like Brandon, the leper—in an unexpected way—moved from fear and loneliness, to freedom from his ailment. And then he recognized what had happened. He noticed the change and who had made it possible. His gratitude to Jesus showed that he understood this moment differently. Being healed was not something he was owed or a chance encounter that changed his life. It was an intentional, holy gift, one that was important to acknowledge.

Just like we heard with Piggie and Elephant, thanking the people around us is very important. It honors the dignity of our friends and neighbors and builds our relationships with them. Something different happens when a gift is recognized and gratitude overflows. When you give someone a gift, it feels so much better to receive a handwritten thank you note in the mail, than it does to hear a simple "thank you." Having the recipient share with you why they love your gift, how useful it's been to them, how it was just what they needed in that moment is powerful. Those responses appreciate the gift for what it is - something joyfully and freely given.

When we forget to thank someone, as Gerald the Elephant was so worried Piggie had done, it hurts. It makes us appear oblivious to all that has been offered to us. Perhaps that was the problem with the other nine lepers. Even though they were just following Jesus' directions to go straight to the priest, they missed an important opportunity to truly recognize the gift they had received from God.