
The Power of Saying Thank You

2 Kings 5, Luke 17:11-19

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 14, 2007 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

One of the things I like best about living in America, or at least North Carolina, is that almost everyone is up for a conversation, almost all of the time. I'm walking down to the parking deck, or around downtown Durham, or off East Campus, and the stranger I walk past says "Hi, how are ya?" I've learned that the correct answer is, "I'm good, how are you?" After that the conversation can go off any number of directions, or it can simply stop with a cheerful sense of well being. In England it doesn't work like that. Instead, you say, with your mouth half-shut, "Morning." To which there are two answers. You can either say "Nice day for it." Or you can say "Shocking weather again." Usually you give the second reply and the conversation's over.

Even better than greeting is the American way of saying thank you. Here whenever one says "Thank you," there's always a reply, "You're welcome" – which turns a simple social grace into a real relationship, a real act of shared pleasure and hospitality. I've discovered there's two ways of saying "You're welcome" – if you stress the first word and almost sing the second word there's a hint of affectionate criticism, as if to say "Didn't you realize I loved you?": "You're welcome." If, on the other hand, you really stress the second word, that means you want the gesture to be taken as the beginning of a friendship, or at least as a simple expression of the joy of finding one has been genuinely helpful: "You're welcome." Again, in England, we almost always get this wrong. When someone says thank you the best we can manage in reply is "Don't mention it" – which is really an outright criticism making the person wonder if they should ever say thank you again – or "The pleasure is all mine" – which is also a correction and leaves you feeling pretty miserable – or "Not at all" – which is the worst of the lot because it suggests the person saying thank you is just plain wrong.

I want to suggest to you that "thank you" is one of the most significant and powerful things one can say. Of course the marketing experts already know this. Browse a bookshelf of business best sellers and you'll find books telling you that a timely thank you letter is the perfect way to get ahead and influence people, to leave a good impression and acquire a new client. True as this may be, I'm not talking about this kind of cynical manipulation. 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, he sends them to the priests, and as they went they were made clean. Up to this point in the story we've already learned a lot about healing. We've learned that God in Christ listens to those who call out to him for mercy. We've learned that the way to respond to Jesus and to find healing is simple obedience. Remember in the Naaman story we read earlier, Naaman is devastated that Elisha doesn't put on a big show but instead simply asks him to wash seven times in the River Jordan. And then Naaman's servants utter some of the most poignant words about discipleship in all of Scripture: "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" The small fidelities are sometimes more significant than the grand gestures. Healing doesn't have to be difficult. Sometimes it's just about obedience. We've also learned that healing sometimes takes time. If you think about it, Jesus was 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. It says they were healed on the way, not straightaway.

So we've already learned a lot about healing by the time we get to the part about only one of the lepers coming back to say thank you. And this second part of the story tells us one more thing about healing. And that's that there's a difference between healing and salvation. 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 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 saying “this is not fundamentally a story about me; this is fundamentally a story about God.” I have been healed not because I trained, or I researched, or I dieted, or even because I prayed; I have been healed because God chose to reveal his power in me. Remember Jesus’ words about the man born blind in John chapter 9: this man was born blind so that the glory of God, or literally the “works” of God, could be revealed in him. When we are reflecting on our lives, past, present or future, do we judge them on how much we have achieved, 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 just or even mostly revealed in the lives of accomplishment and success. The glory of God tends mostly to be revealed in lives that are broken and have got big holes in them. As one contemporary songwriter puts it, “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” 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 have 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. Just imagine the Samaritan leper waking up one morning, and being told, “It’s good news! Jesus is coming by here later and if you play your cards right you could end up appearing in the gospel of Luke and being talked about by Christians thousands of years later and living with God forever.” That’s quite a wake up call. But just think for a moment. How is it different from the wake up call you and I get every single day? You and I have been invited into this story too. You and I have lives in which the glory of God can be revealed, any day. And the way to play your cards right and get to be part of the story is quite simple, simpler even than Naaman’s response to Elisha. 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 may have been very different. God might not have created 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. God might not have created you and me. It might all 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 minor details. We take the world and our existence, even Jesus, for granted, and we concentrate on the parts that seem to go wrong. We discover our family isn’t as happy or straightforward as other families and we look for someone to blame, one of our parents perhaps, or one of theirs. We find ourselves isolated from the way other people are woven into God’s story, and so we take to imagining that we have a level of pain or hurt that is so much greater than anyone else’s, and until that pain is heard and listened to and understood and affirmed we refuse to trust or engage or enjoy the bigger story at all. To a life that is mired in resentment, gratitude is a stranger. But the only medicine for a life 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. Luke’s gospel is all about God bringing his people out of the exile of political oppression, physical sickness, spiritual blindness and communal exclusion by forming a new community around the crucified and risen Jesus. Four times in Luke’s gospel Jesus says the words “Your faith has made you well,” and so it’s reasonable to group together the four people he says it to. The first is the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, whom everyone knew to be a sinner. The second is the woman with the twelve years of hemorrhages. The third is this Samaritan leper, and the fourth is a blind beggar. In other words Jesus makes a new community out of the sinner, the sick, the second-class, the disabled, the foreigner and the socially excluded. And they are all astonished and joyful and full of thanks for being made part of God’s story in Jesus. They turn out to be people in whom the glory of God is revealed. And you can become one of those people in learning to say the words “thank you.” It’s an interesting company to join of course. Many people assume students and faculty come to Duke to be part of a social, cultural, economic and intellectual elite that keeps you well away from the sinner, the sick, the second-class, the disabled, the foreigner and the socially excluded. Whether that’s true or not, that’s certainly not the reason you come to church. You come to church to join the company of people in whom the glory of God is revealed. And it turns out that first among them are the sinner, the sick, the second-class, the disabled, the foreigner and the socially

excluded. It's a wonderful company, so long as one never makes the mistake of thinking it's a limited company. And it's a company you enter when you say thank you.

When you say thank you to the person who serves you food, to the person who holds the door open for you, to the person who gives you notices you're limping, to the person who handles your groceries through the checkout, in this small way you're realizing "It didn't have to be this way" – and you're recognizing that like God, this person has made you a part of a bigger story, a story in which people are overwhelmed not by what they've suffered, but by what they've received. To say thank you is to recognize your dependence on another person, to say "You make my life possible." And to say thank you is slowly, gradually, to become the most powerful person in the world, the person who is so filled with awe and wonder with the life and grace they have been given by God that no suffering or cruelty or manipulation or misunderstanding or disease or tragedy can break their spirit. The most powerful person in the world is the one who in the face of horror and scarcity can only see beyond it to glory and abundance. Nothing can destroy such a person.

Such a person was Martin Rinkart. He became the pastor of 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 over thirty years. Eilenberg was a walled city. It became a crowded haven for political and military refugees. This left the city vulnerable to disease and famine. In the year 1637 there was terrible plague. Martin Rinkart was the only pastor remaining in Eilenberg. He conducted 4000 funerals in that year, including up to 50 funerals a day. As the signs of peace and the tide of slaughter, famine and plague began to recede in the 1640s, Martin Rinkart, who had lost half his household, including his wife, and could have been forgiven for feeling resentful, angry and unforgiving, sat down and wrote one of the most famous hymns in the German language, *Nun danket alle Gott*, which we know in English as "Now thank we all our God". Viewing the wreckage of war, and the folly of his fellow human beings, he nonetheless still saw the ultimate grace of God, which had given him life, had given him Jesus, had given him hope, had given him unlikely friends, and still gave him faith. Like Naaman he did the simple thing and just said thank you. It's difficult to imagine what it might have meant for Martin Rinkart to be healed. But it's hard to doubt that he was saved. And in writing this hymn he displayed what we rediscover when we sing it today: the power of saying thank you.

Martin Rinkart was a person in whom the glory of God was revealed. And it was revealed through his ability and 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, and may we too become people in whom the glory of God is revealed.