

October 2, 2016
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Luke 17:11-19

Unwritten Thank You Notes

Told that he must write thank you notes to people who have given him gifts, twelve year old Greg Heffley, the protagonist of the series *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, comes up with a form letter. You can tell from the title, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, the kind of kid Greg is: awkward, nervous, a bit of an outsider, prone to mishaps—and it should be noted: Greg gets himself into some of them. The thank you notes, for instance. Tasked with writing them, Greg thinks, wouldn't it be so much easier if he had a pre-written form, something into which he could simply insert words for the gift and the giver and occasion. And so it is that when Christmas comes and Greg's great aunt Loretta—a dear but dotty figure who is not known for selecting gifts that are just what a twelve-year-old boy would want—when the gifting has happened, the celebration has passed, and now he's tasked with saying thanks, Greg decides to write a thank you note using his form letter. The letter is reproduced on the pages of his diary, with certain words scripted in: “Dear **Aunt Loretta**, Thank you so much for the awesome **pants!** How did you know I wanted that for **Christmas?** I love the way the **pants** look on my **legs!** All my friends will be so jealous that I have my very own **pants**. Thank you for making this the best **Christmas** ever! Sincerely, Greg”

As this wimpy kid's diary humorously shows, sometimes giving thanks can seem like a task: “You have to write those thank you notes!” I admit there are times I've felt this way, and I'm sure I've made my children feel this way, I've probably used those exact words: “You have to write those thank you notes!” This is both ironic, and unfortunate, since telling someone they should be grateful is a pretty good way to be make them feel less grateful, rather than more. Giving thanks is something you should do, and something you should want to do, but sometimes giving thanks tilts more towards obligation than obvious, natural, joyful response.

I think today's gospel story from Luke is sometimes interpreted with more emphasis on the former, rather than the latter. I think the story of the ten healed and the one who came back can be told as a scold. Ten lepers, ten people are suffering from a skin disease—you could make a further connection with middle schoolers there, junior high being a time of life that can come with skin conditions. I remember what that's like, to be so worried about your face, your skin—maybe you, too, know how hard that can be. In the ancient world, the diseases known as leprosy were that, and more: difficult, painful, causing one to be socially ostracized, and contagious as well. Ten people in the today's gospel story suffer from that, and all of them are given a gift. They are all given a wonderful gift, one they all dearly want, but only one of comes back to Jesus to express his gratitude. To which Jesus says, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Only one of them bothered to write a thank you note?

You could read Jesus' questions like that; you could hear what Jesus says as a disappointed scold. It's not good manners after all, to receive a gift and not say thanks. But if that's all that is at stake, than all that we suffer from is a case of poor etiquette. We know we lack that, but that is only a symptom. Humanity is a lot sicker than that—and the gospel is more than mere politeness. Jesus did not come to click his tongue at us. Jesus came to save us.

The story shows us this in way it intertwines words of healing and salvation—salvation itself having as its root, “salve.” When the ten lepers' cry for healing, they cry for mercy. And all receive it; all receive mercy. Jesus response is healing for all—not because they asked

politely but simply because they need help. And then, the one who comes back is commended, not for his courtesy, but for his faith, for faith that has made him well. There is more going on here than good manners, or even better health.

This is also emphasized with the different locations people inhabit at different points in the story. At the beginning, everyone is far apart. The lepers have a contagious skin disease, after all, so they stay at a distance, and it is from a distance that they call out for mercy. They all receive healing, but then the nine seemingly disappear, just the one comes back. And notice his location now, this one who comes back to say thanks, he no longer stays at a distance. He comes right up to Jesus, comes so close that he is crouched down at Jesus' feet. And this man, we learn, is a Samaritan. You may recall that to the first readers of this story, Samaritans were unpopular, ostracized, outsiders. This man is not outside anymore; he couldn't be closer to Jesus. This man who suffered so much, is now right next to the one who has given him the most wonderful gift.

And this is when Jesus asks his questions, those questions about the other nine, about where they are, about why they didn't return. Jesus doesn't ask these questions because he wants to point out how ungrateful those others are. That's now how God operates. Jesus doesn't ask these questions because he is rethinking his generosity. That's not how God operates, either. Jesus is not asking these questions because he feels snubbed—as if God Almighty could be diminished by the likes of us, wimps. Jesus doesn't feel slighted, Jesus is saddened that so many people are experiencing only a fraction of the life that he offers. “The other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise?”

Jesus asks, in wonder and sadness, because those other nine got only a fraction of life in it its wholeness, the life that God graciously, generously offers to all. In not coming back, they missed out on the fullness of healing. They weren't sick anymore, but they missed out on the best part: the chance to be close to Jesus. They missed out on joyfulness and praise; they missed out on intimacy and individuality. That last man who returned, he got all of that. He was not just healed, as the story says, he was made well.

Here's a yet more miraculous thing about the healing that Jesus offers, in all its fullness, here's something else about it that is miraculous, and mysterious, and difficult, and beautiful. Jesus offers healing to all—and even if our bodies do not get better. Even if our skin doesn't clear, or the hip doesn't mend, and even if the cancer returns. It is a heartbreaking truth that here on earth there are illnesses that no doctor can cure. It is a heartbreaking truth that even with all the wonders of modern medicine, still there may be no explanation, nothing to be done. It is a heartbreaking truth that though nine out ten patients will respond to a treatment, you, or someone you love, may be that one that does not.

It is also true, I believe this in my heart, and it is at the heart of our faith, that that whatever sickness you may suffer, it is not the sum of your life. Whatever problem you have, physical or mental or emotional, it is not a prognosis for who you are as a person. Whatever our disease, it does not define who we are in the eyes of God, and it need not determine how we live. I have seen it, and I'll bet you have too. I have seen people with all manner of ailment who are the most generous, and loving, and joyful people. They are people who have decided to “live their lives as a thank you note,” as our Bishop, Wayne Miller, has said. That is what this story, what Christin life, invites, urges us to do: to live our whole lives as a thank you note to God. That is what a life of praise looks like, as Martin Luther said, that is “the nature of true worship: the tenth leper turning back.” We could be that leper, we could write that letter, write it with our lives, filling it in like this: Dear God, Thank you for pants, for skin, for me. Thank you for Christmas, and for all that came after. Thank for all that I have yet to become. Sincerely, Your Name.