

October 13, 2013

**SO LET US CELEBRATE! LET US REJOICE! LET US GIVE THANKS!
LET US PRAISE GOD!**

by Pastor Clarissa Martinelli

Luke 17:11-19

A large dog walks into a butcher shop carrying a purse in its mouth. He puts the purse down and sits in front of the meat case. "What is it, boy?" the butcher jokingly asks. "Want to buy some meat?" "Woof!" barks the dog. "Hmm," says the butcher. "What kind? Liver, bacon, steak..." "Woof!" interrupts the dog. "And how much steak? Half a pound, one pound..." "Woof!" The amazed butcher wraps up the meat and finds the money in the dog's purse.

As the dog leaves, the butcher decides to follow. The dog enters an apartment house, climbs to the third floor and begins scratching at a door. With that, the door swings open, and an angry man starts shouting at the dog. "Stop!" yells the butcher. "He's the most intelligent animal I've ever seen!" "Intelligent?" says the man. "This is the third time this week he's forgotten his key."

1. Be thankful even if you are in difficult circumstances. This kind of thankfulness is faith.

We read the story too quickly, I think. Slow it down, and picture it with me. We start with ten men who have the worst disease of their day. The physical ramifications are horrendous. Leprosy attacks the body, leaving sores, missing fingers, and missing toes, damaged limbs. In many cases, the initial pain of leprosy gives way to something more terrible than that - a loss of sensation in nerve endings, leading to more damage to more body parts. The disease can take 30 years to run its course, and in that time span, entire limbs can simply fall off. It is, assuredly, a most horrible disease. We have nearly an impossible task in trying to fathom what it was like 2,000 years ago, when medical treatment as we know it today was almost non-existent.

What is a leper colony? The first and overwhelming barrier is the smell. Most cannot work up the stomach to go inside the colony, and even worse is becoming violently ill as you face human beings already acutely aware that they are different. And, I think, we can gain a new appreciation of how bad this disease must have been in the days of Christ. It wasn't just the grotesque damage, or the attack to our

sight. It wasn't just the loud cries, the attack to our hearing. It was also the smell of rotting, decaying flesh, overwhelming even our sense of smell.

The emotional pain of a leper, however, must have been even worse than the physical pain. They were removed from family, from community. There could be no contact, whatsoever, with their children or grandchildren. None. Immediately removed. Husbands and wives would not be allowed to kiss them goodbye - for fear that they, too, would become afflicted. Lepers tended to roam together, looking for food, begging for assistance from a great distance, learning to yell in loud voices, both from the need to warn others, and to beg for help from across the way. What would it have been like to be removed from friends and family for a lifetime, and to be forced to announce that removal on a daily basis? It must have been horrible. And yet, in this account, ten men encounter Jesus, and hear him say the most unusual thing. "We want to be well!" they scream at Jesus. And the great teacher responds, "Go and show yourselves to the priest."

The local priest had duties other than leading worship on each Sabbath. He was also something of a health official. If a person was miraculously healed of leprosy, it was up to the priest to inspect the body, to test for a complete removal of the disease, and to announce the person healed. In such cases, the person would have been cleansed, and at that point, it would be fine for the leper to see his wife again, to hold his daughter again, to look for work again. If the priest gave him the OK, he would be healed!

Now, Jesus says to these lepers, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." They look down at their bodies. The hands of one man are still mangled. Another man looks at his leg, which ends with a filthy rag at the knee. Another looks at his skin, and finds it as repulsive as ever. In other words, all of these men were no better off than they had been ten minutes earlier, when they had first spotted the famous teacher.

And yet, they headed off in search of the priests. And on their way, they were healed. On their way, a hand reappeared, and tingled with life. A crutch tripped on a filthy rag, as it fell to the ground. The leg was back, healthy, whole, and complete. The skin cleared, and the tiny hairs on a forearm turned from snow white to brown. One looked at the other, another looked at the rest, and the screaming started. The smiles broke into cheering, and a sweet madness. They raced off in the distance, not believing that the nightmare was finally over. But in order for the miracle to happen, these men had to start walking in faith before their circumstances had changed one tiny bit.

You cannot wait until the problems are over to start walking in faith. You cannot put conditions on holy God. You cannot say, "Lord, as soon as there's enough money, I follow your instructions." You cannot pray, "Lord, if you'll just solve this issue in my family, I'll start to church." You cannot put conditions on God! Instead, God places a demand for faith on us, before anything at all has changed. God might say, "Love me despite the disease. Obey me despite the lack of talent, or the lack of resources. Follow me now, despite the depression. Say no to the temptation, while it still is difficult. Praise me in the darkest of nights, and in the worst of circumstances."

This is the nature of God, a God who loves you so much, He'll give you the opportunity to be thankful when nothing about your circumstances gives you that motivation. My friends, that is the very definition of faith. If you praised God only on the good days, only in the best of circumstances, it would not be faith at all. Some of you are in horrible circumstances right now. And what awaits you today, this week, is forcing you to answer a faith filled question - Will you be thankful despite your difficult circumstances? If so, you will have experienced faith.

2. Be thankful in the work of God's goodness. This kind of thankfulness is worship.

One of the men came back to Jesus, and praised God. He was thankful. He was public about it. He was loud - he wasn't shy at all. Why was he so loud? This guy had been forced to yell for as long as he'd had leprosy. Had it been years? He'd probably yelled so long, he didn't know how to come to the Lord quietly, or even in a normal voice. When he came back and fell at the feet of Jesus, he was just louder than the normal person, and he was praising God. This is an amazingly short application point. This week, be sure you take time to acknowledge God for his goodness. Be sure to actually be thankful. Be sure to gather everyone up for a prayer of Thanksgiving a real prayer of thankfulness. Don't miss the opportunity to worship God this week. And be loud about it!

3. Make sure your thankfulness leads to action.

One healed leper came back - in the midst of the celebration, he returned to Jesus. He reversed his steps, put his family on hold, put the priest on hold, and came back to the cause of his celebration. His response and life situation were unique, but in the simplest sense of what he did, his thankfulness led to action.

What kind of action is Jesus looking for from you? Has God's Holy Spirit been

urging you toward some action? Has the Lord been tugging at you for some step of faith? Is there a family, a friend, or even a stranger in need? Is there something you feel compelled to do? Take that step of action. Do not wonder what will others say or question your qualifications or skills. Take that one step to act upon God's call on your life, and God will certainly make two steps towards victory.

Listen about our wonderful Savior. God is saying to us: This is the Messiah. This is the Christ. This is Immanuel. God is with you, for only God has healed lepers.

Only God.

Can I give you another reason to love this Jesus? Can I show you another proof that he loves you, no matter who you are, where you've been, or what you've done? It's a story Matthew recorded. (Read **Matt. 8:1-4**)

A leper approaches Jesus, stopping at the required distance. He knelt before Jesus, begging for help. The very sight of him was repulsive. The smell of him was revolting. People gasped, and backed away. Some surely commanded him to clear the roadway, to not put anyone at risk. "Get out, get out, get out!"

Matthew writes that Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.

A moment later, he tells us that Jesus spoke the words: "Be clean . . . go show yourself to the priest."

Did you see both miracles? The leprosy was gone. That's the easy miracle to see. But the other one? It was the touch of a loving hand. It was the touch of a human hand.

Today, you've touched more people in an hour than this man had touched in years. Today, you've been close to friends or family. Maybe a child has been in your lap. Maybe a hug met you at a door. Maybe it was a firm handshake from a firmer friend.

Not this guy. He longed for a loving touch more than he longed for food. More than he needed water, he needed love. And before he was healed, while there was still a tremendous risk, Jesus was willing to give him that touch.

No abuse has scarred you so badly that Jesus won't touch you. Jesus is willing to lovingly touch you, hold you, and restore you.

No sin has made you unlovable. Jesus is willing to call you his friend and stand beside you. It was his death that paid for your sin.

No fear has disqualified you. No problem has put your life on hold. No failure has negated his love. The miracle is the love of Jesus, for you. No exceptions, no qualifications, no doubts. He loves you. And for that, O God, we are so thankful.

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