

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 9, 2022

2 KINGS 5:1-3, 7-15C | PSALM 111 | 2 TIMOTHY 2:8-15 | LUKE 17:11-19

When you were taught how to write an essay in school, you probably learned that you're supposed to put the most important idea right up at the top. Maybe you remember underlining your thesis statement just to make sure you had one. Or maybe you remember being told that you had a fantastic introduction paragraph, only problem is you used it as a conclusion. In any case, the advice is the same: good writers don't bury the lede.

The gospel writers—unencumbered by the wise counsel of middle school teachers—often do the exact opposite. They often take the most important part of the story and put it at the very end.

Case in point is today's gospel reading. Jesus heals ten lepers of their disease and tells them to show themselves to the priests. But when one of the lepers sees his lesions healed, he turns around and goes back to thank Jesus. And Jesus concludes the story by telling him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

The word "well" is doing a lot of work in that final sentence. And it raises what is probably the most interesting question in the text: was the leper who came back to thank Jesus different from the other nine in any meaningful way? What exactly does Jesus mean when he says this man has been made "well?" Is it "well" like the other nine? Or something different?

Let's think about the other nine for a minute. Luke describes all the lepers as being "cleansed," which comes from the Greek *katharizō*. Luke tends to use that to describe ritual cleanliness. It's used to describe how the Pharisees clean pots in Luke's gospel, and it's used in arguments over table fellowship in Acts. So when Jesus sends them to show themselves to the priests, it's basically saying *Show yourself to the priests so that they can verify that your lesions are healed and you can participate fully in the life of your community.*

What distinguishes the Samaritan leper from the other nine is not that only he has faith. The other nine had faith, too. They asked to be healed. What makes the Samaritan leper unique is that he is the only one who comes back and gives thanks. The only one who practices gratitude. In the Greek, he's the only one who has *eucharistia*. You can see where this is going, but let's keep working through the story.

And because this man gives thanks, his encounter with Jesus is different. Jesus says he's been made well, which comes from the Greek word *σωζō*. That's not about being ritually clean, but it means experiencing God's salvation. Other places in Luke's gospel, that same Greek gets translated as, "Go in peace, your faith has saved you." The King James Version captures depth of transformation when it reads, "Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole." *Your faith has made you whole.*

And that's where the heart of the story lies. In the relationship between giving thanks and being made whole. For Luke, the other nine lepers have been physically healed and made ritually clean. But it's the gratitude of the Samaritan leper that has made him whole. Luke seems to be suggesting that a life without gratitude is incomplete. It's missing something from it. Eucharistia, thanksgiving, gratitude makes us whole.

There's something deeply counterintuitive about this. We often talk about wholeness as independence from others. Our young folks hear that you're in the "real world" when you're independent from your parents. The message our older folks get is that if you need an aide or if you need to move into a group home, you're not a whole person in quite the same way. And for those of us who are in between, we often tell ourselves that if you are relying on other people for anything, you are failing somehow. A fully realized life is one that's independent, self-sufficient, and doesn't need anything from anyone. So if you're grateful, you're doing it wrong.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

This doesn't really work in theory. It makes us resentful, suspicious, and self-righteous. It gets us all worked up over how we're perceived by others and leads us to make self-defeating choices. And it doesn't really work in practice, either. When people say that they don't rely on other people, they're really saying that aren't aware of how they rely on other people. I'm reminded of something I read recently about people who move off the grid to live independently of other people and how it was a great time to extricate yourself from society because you could get tax incentives to subsidize your solar panels.

We try to find wholeness through self-sufficiency, but Jesus takes that idea and flips it on its head. And suggests that we find wholeness not through self-sufficiency but in receiving the gifts of others. Gratitude makes us whole because it recognizes that our reliance on others isn't a bug that we need to get rid of or a problem we need to move past or a stage we need to grow out of. It's a feature. To be dependent on other people is part of what it means to be a person and not just an individual.

Some of you may remember that in the Small Catechism, Luther has this part where he explains what the line about "daily bread" means in the Lord's Prayer. And he says that daily bread refers to "everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house..." That's not surprising. But here's the fun part. That list goes on to include partners, children, members of our household, civic government, friends, and neighbors. The vision of wholeness here isn't transcending the need for relationship. Wholeness means recognizing how other people uphold and sustain our lives.

Gratitude is just what happens when we realize what our daily bread is. Gratitude means recognizing where God's gifts are from and knowing what they're for. When we forget where they're from, we act as if we create our own lives. And when we forget what they're for, we act as if they're just here for our benefit. Thanksgiving, eucharistia, is what happens when we see both clearly.

And we see both clearly every time we gather together at table. We receive the gifts that God gives us, we offer our thanks and praise, and then we offer all that we have received in the service of God's mission in the world.¹ In our encounter with Christ, we discover exactly what the Samaritan leper discovered. That we are a people who recognize what the gifts of God are and a people who understand what they're entrusted to us for.

So whenever you hear someone say, "Well, out in the real world, blah, blah, blah, something about being independent and self-made..." you should remember that this table is the real world. This is where you become who God says you really are. This is where we learn to see one another with our faces turned toward Christ. This is where we both receive and offer the goodness of God's daily bread. This is where we are made into a eucharistic people.

Every time Christ meets us here at table, God teaches us how to receive. Every time Christ meets us here at table, God empowers us to give of ourselves as bread for the world. And every time Christ meets us here at table, God makes each and every one of us whole.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ Alexander Schmemmann on the Eucharist: At table we are "both receiving the world from God and offering it to God... and by filling this world with [our] eucharist, [we] transforms [our] life." Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973).