

Thankfulness and Forgiveness

October 12th Sermon

Tomorrow is thanksgiving, which is a holiday that I quite enjoy, as I love eating food and being with people. I like most people, also enjoy an extra day off. The origins of Thanksgiving serve as an interesting discussion point, and have some connection with our scripture texts this morning.

A very, very simplified explanation of Thanksgiving, may be that both European peasants, and North American Indigenous peoples had similar Fall traditions. It was normal to have a celebratory feast in correlation with the harvest of food in both these cultures. When these cultures found themselves on the same continent, they continued in their fall practices, often together. There are some feel good aspects to the tradition of Thanksgiving, like Samuel de Champlain organizing a rotating feast in the Fall to try and combat the scurvy epidemic of the early 1600s. These feasts were for local settlers, and the local Mi'kmaq people. We have the American presentation of Thanksgiving, which also has a complicated history, but the storybook version involves Pilgrims in their belt buckle hats celebrating with the indigenous people of the region who helped them have a successful harvest after a difficult winter.

As with most history, a simplified feel-good portrayal does not capture the reality and the nuance of the events. In both the American and Canadian origins of Thanksgiving, the focus is on these coming together moments, glossing over the stealing of land, and colonizing of regions that occurred before any joint celebration of the harvest took place. For American thanksgiving, the story told in its simplistic form leaves out that the land was available because plagues wiped out the indigenous peoples at Plymouth. Squanto's involvement revolves around his role as a translator, and teaching settlers' effective methods for planting in North America. What is left out is that he was sold into slavery in Spain, and upon eventually returning to North America, his people were gone due to small pox.

For our youth Bible lessons right now we are exploring Feminist Theology, and one of the things that we are invited to do in Feminist Theology, is to consider the stories that are glossed over in scripture. The focus of scripture is often dominated by males, so it is important to examine where we are missing out on important stories. The same principle can be applied to other voices in scripture that we do not hear from. The unnamed and under described characters we encounter also deserve consideration.

This morning, we have two stories of profound thankfulness, as well as two stories where some characters are treated as “the other”. There are also some interesting parallels to colonialism in these stories. Let’s dive in, starting with the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers, and the one who came back to thank him. Whenever I hear the words healing lepers, I think of this classic misunderstanding:

Slide of Michael Scott

In doing a tiny bit of research, I found that this story of Jesus healing ten men with leprosy, is meant to serve as a parallel to the story of the Good Samaritan, and the story of King Naaman, which we will get to later. Jesus is travelling “along the border of Galilee and Samaria”, some translations say “in the region between Galilee and Samaria” which doesn’t actually exist since the two regions border each other. It is possible that the author is referring to the common practice of dodging around Samaria, as many Jewish folks found it distasteful to go through Samaria.

There Jesus encounters ten men with leprosy, again some translations say ten men with leprosy, others say ten lepers- ten men with leprosy seems like a more appropriate and inclusive phrase, and it also helps prevent us from accidentally thinking that Jesus is healing a large spotted cat. Now people with leprosy were incredibly isolated and ostracized based on the cleanliness codes of the Old Testament. Consider what it might be like to have leprosy based on these references:

“Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who has a defiling skin disease or a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse; you shall put out both male and

female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.” Numbers 5:2-3

“The person who has the defiling disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. Leviticus 13:45-46

Jesus obviously sees these men with leprosy, how can you not when they are outside of the city, forced to shout unclean, unclean when people go by so they are not tempted to come close and say hello and become defiled themselves. The only way to become clean was to have the disease pass, and then to have a priest declare that you were clean. It is a quite dehumanizing, and probably ineffective treatment plan. Imagine having a bad sunburn and telling them “Go be outside and alone in the elements so your skin can heal.”

Jesus tells them, start walking, go to the priest, and sure enough as they are walking, they are healed. By the time they get to the priest, they are declared clean. One of the men with leprosy turns back, and expresses his thankfulness. This is where we usually get the moral of our story, be thankful, be the one who turns around and praises God for a good thing. Similar to the history of thanksgiving story, there are some underlying prejudices here that get glossed over.

This next part is mainly an observation of my own, not super backed up with data, so take it with a grain of salt. The person who wrote down this story (the author of Luke), has told it in a really wonderful way. They have recounted a moment of compassion that is typical for Jesus, and are able to communicate that the man with leprosy who expresses thanks, is the one who the audience would not expect. The man who says thanks is the unlikely protagonist. It is a parallel of the Good Samaritan, where the despised Samaritan is the one who shows love and compassion. The

message being two-fold, be thankful, and righteousness is not restricted by borders. Someone's background or ethnicity does not determine whether they are good or bad. I wonder however, if we sometimes gloss over just how bad this divide between Jews and Samaritans was, and I wonder if that divide is present in the text when it says "No one returned to praise God except this **foreigner**?"

I am personally confused by the use of the word foreigner here. Because Jesus is in Samaria, or at least really close to Samaria. Why is the Samaritan identified as a foreigner? There could be a lot of reasons for this. Perhaps they are trying to drive home the point that the person who expresses gratitude is "the other". Maybe that was how everyone referred to Samaritans, including Jesus. Maybe the bias of the author is seeping into this text. Samaritans are not the first people to feel like outsiders, even in their homeland, and they are unfortunately not the last. When Indigenous people attended early thanksgiving celebrations, were they treated as foreigners, in a land they had been in for centuries? By people who had just colonized the land in recent memory?

The parallels between this story and the story of Naaman are evident. Someone seen as the other, or as a foreigner is healed, and gives thanks. In the story of Naaman's healing, there is an additional important element. Forgiveness. Or at least compassion for someone who caused harm. When Naaman is afflicted of his skin disease, it is a slave girl, taken from Israel who tells him that he might be cured if he finds the prophet who is in Samaria. Elisha is Israel's prophet, but his location is in Samaria, another interesting parallel to our other text.

The girl in captivity is not given a name. She is not even thanked by Naaman, who tries to bestow impressive gifts on Elisha. Her act of compassion doesn't even grant her freedom. What was it like for this girl? Was Naaman kind to her after forcibly removing her from what was familiar? Or did he repeatedly disregard her humanity? Did she wrestle with the decision to let him know about Elisha? If so, what prompted her to tell her mistress about a potential cure? Could she not help but look at Naaman with compassion, despite the fact that he did not treat her with

compassion? Did she do it begrudgingly, knowing it was the righteous thing to do, but wishing she could leave Naaman as he was. This is an example of how we can look at the unheard voices in scripture. A major focus in this story, is Naaman's thankfulness, and God's compassion for healing. If we gloss over the captive girl's part in this story, we miss out on another important message- the radical forgiveness and compassion of the oppressed towards their oppressor.

Often, forgiveness is forced upon the oppressed. Get over it, or hang onto it and suffer. While the oppressor reaps the benefits with little consequence. That is not justice, and reconciliation requires work from both sides. I do not want to force or pressure oppressed people to forgive their oppressors. When the oppressed choose such radical forgiveness however, I do think that is something to celebrate. If we acknowledge how powerful, and difficult that is, I think we also reduce the risk of glossing over the suffering of others.

When we celebrate Thanksgiving, whether in its Canadian or American form, there are some good messages. Some feel good stories. There is also a dark side of the story. Full of violence, colonialism, stealing of land, and the suffering of Indigenous peoples. To acknowledge both is to learn from the strength and empathy of Indigenous people. As Christians, we can learn from this. We can learn how to show compassion for those who hurt us. Like the captive Israelite girl who had compassion for her oppressor Naaman. We can address transgressions in the past, and see how they affect our current biases, and our wider world. Like the Samaritan being referred to as a foreigner in his own land, or Indigenous people pushed to the fringes of a land that they cared for and lived off of.

This thanksgiving may we take to heart two lessons instead of one.

We can engage in the act of thankfulness. Thanking God for all the good things in life. Coming back to express gratitude, like the Samaritan with leprosy, or the King Naaman.

We can also take time to acknowledge the ugly parts of life. The othering of the Samaritan with leprosy. The disregard for the enslaved Israelite girl.

The colonizing of this land. May radical moments of compassion serve as an example of how to live. Let the forgiveness of others be a wake-up call towards justice, and not a permission slip to keep oppressing.

Benediction: Like Naaman who gave thanks when he was restored to health, and like the tenth leper who returned to praise God when he was healed, go forth with thankful hearts for the power at work within you. Endure hardship with patience, and trust the mercy and grace of your Lord. Live as true servants of Jesus Christ, always seeking to hear the unheard voices.

Children's Time

I have two questions this morning, and I promise they are totally related.

My first question is, have you ever had a bad bug bite, or been really itchy?

My second question which is totally related, is what is something you are thankful for?

In both of our stories this morning, people with skin diseases are healed. It was probably a lot worse than being itchy. When they were healed, they were very thankful. In each of these stories, someone helped them get healed.

Jesus helped someone who he was told that he wasn't supposed to like. He went to people he wasn't supposed to go to and healed them. One of them, the most unlikely one, came and thanked Jesus. In that story Jesus helped heal ten people with a skin disease, but only one thanked him.

In the case of Naaman, he did something very mean, and he forced a young girl to work in his castle. This girl who he took from home, helped him to get healed. She told him about a prophet from her homeland who might be able to heal her. So I hope today, you are able to be thankful for the good things you have, and also have compassion for people who have different struggles. If you spend time with family eating food, I hope you enjoy that a lot!