

## **Thank you**

Luke 17:11-19

October 13, 2013

Surprise!

Were you surprised? Do you like surprises? Of course, it depends, because there are good surprises and there are bad surprises. And yet, if all surprises were good, they wouldn't really be surprises, would they?

So, do you like surprises, even considering the risk? You must! Can you imagine a life without any surprises, everything going according to plan, each new day bringing just what you expect it to bring, every experience no more and no less and no different than how you imagined it beforehand? Dullsville!

Life itself is a surprise. Or did you look into the face of that tiny prune-skinned baby newly-emerged from the birth canal, sucking air into her lungs and expelling it again in a first startled wail, and say: "Yeah, that's just what I expected?"

Surprise opens our eyes and our ears and our minds and our hearts to new wonders and fills us with delight. Surprise can change our understanding and expand our empathy. Surprise connects us to an ever-enlarging universe of places and people and events and ideas and feelings. Surprise helps us grow up. God is in the surprises, reminding us that we don't have it all figured out, that we aren't in control. God is in the surprises.

The story of Jesus' encounter with ten wretched men just outside a village on the border between Samaria and Galilee is full of surprises. Let me tell you about four surprises in Luke's retelling of this story.

The first surprise? They were healed. The ten men were healed of their terrible and devastating skin disease.

Or do you expect to be healed? Did they expect to be healed? They shouted: "Jesus! Master! Have pity on us!" They were looking for pity, for mercy, for kindness, for some kind of acknowledgment, some kind of tenderness, some kind of help, but did they expect Jesus to heal them?

Maybe that's what they were asking for. They clearly knew who Jesus was and undoubtedly knew of his reputation. Yet, even so, they kept their distance, they didn't approach him. That wasn't allowed.

As horrible as the physical effects of their disease must have been, it was the emotional and spiritual effects that were truly devastating. They were outcasts, literally, expelled from common society, forced by custom and fear to live apart, only having ... each other. They came together, a band of ten miserable outcasts, begging Jesus for mercy.

And Jesus told them to go, go show themselves to the priests, and, on the way, they were healed! It is told so simply. It is so matter-of-fact, so unspectacular. On the way, they were made clean. Understated, but entirely unexpected.

It was a surprise, a surprising gift from God. They were healed of their skin disease -- not utterly and finally and completely saved, but given this one surprising gift, this one touch of God's grace.

Healing of a disease, deliverance from a threat, rescue from a life that is headed in a bad direction, whatever the reason, is not the end of the story, but a beginning. God touches your life. God sets you free from some oppressor, from some demon, from something that is pulling you down, holding you back, ruining your life, and gives you a new start. Then, the question is: "What will you do with it?"

And that's the second surprise, what one man did with it. He came back. He received a surprising gift from God, and he came back to offer his own surprising gift to God -- his gratitude.

Or maybe the surprise is that the others didn't come back. Jesus asked: "Where are the other nine?" Maybe what is surprising, astonishing, is that we -- we human beings, God's creatures, God's children -- show so little gratitude.

But he did. He came back, praising God in a loud voice, throwing himself prostrate at Jesus' feet. He is demonstrative. He is dramatic. He is excited. He has something to get excited about, something to shout about, something to sing about!

Do you have something to be excited about? Enough to shout? Enough to sing? Enough to cut loose? That's the gift, the most precious gift, we have to offer God -- our gratitude, our praise, our ecstasy.

The third surprise, of course, is the identity of the man who came back. He was a Samaritan. He was, to the Jews, and even to Jesus who was himself a Jew, a foreigner, someone not expected to share the same religious sensibilities and sensitivities as the Jews, someone not expected to do the right thing.

But should we be surprised?

That's the surprising gift the gospel writer offers us, to all who hear his story. We are startled. We are shocked. We are surprised that it was a Samaritan who came back, a Samaritan who offered his unrestrained and joyful praise to Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ... his God. The surprise opens our minds. Why not? Why not him?

And the surprise opens our hearts. Yes, there is beauty, there is righteousness, in unexpected places. Or, better yet, maybe we have been wrong not to expect to see beauty, not to expect to find righteousness, anywhere, everywhere! Because God is everywhere, God is anywhere, blessing his children with surprising gifts.

There is one more surprise, the fourth surprise. Jesus said to the one who came back, to the Samaritan: "Get up and go; your faith has made you well."

Yes, of course, he was well. The skin disease was healed. Or is that what Jesus meant? This was a word of blessing spoken just to him. Your faith has made you well -- the faith shown by your return, by your praise, by your gratitude.

It is not just bodies that are broken, not just bodies that need to be healed. Our real brokenness, the brokenness that can destroy not just our bodies, but our very selves, is separation, alienation, broken relationships. Separation from God. Separation from each other. Estrangement from God. Estrangement from each other. That's the healing Jesus came to do, to reconcile the world to God, to heal the brokenness.

This man was well, he was saved, because he understood his debt to God, because he acknowledged his utter dependence on the grace of God. "Thank you ... Thank you!" It was the relationship that mattered! God was with him and he was with God. He was not alone anymore. He was not alienated anymore. He was not cut off anymore. He was well!

Gratitude acknowledges the debt. We need God and we need each other. Gratitude reconciles us. Gratitude reconnects us. Gratitude makes us well.

So thank you ...

Thank you, Lee. It means so much to me that you are here, volunteering to be a worship leader, staying connected to your church family. It means so much to me that you did not consider confirmation to be the end of your journey, but just a step along the way. And it means so much to me to be able to consider you, not just a member of the church I serve, but a brother, a friend. Thank you.

Thank you, Abbey. You came back. You came back to us and shared your gifts with us -- the gift of your ability to put faith and love into words, and gift of your service. You are our youngest deacon! I think you are the youngest deacon in the history of our church! Thank you.

Thank you, Barbara. You have jumped right in and eagerly embraced us -- virtual strangers! You have stoked our passion for music and stoked our passion for God. Thank you.

Thank you, Miah. Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, you transport me. You help me worship. You take me into God's presence. But it is not just your music, it is your heart that warms my heart. Thank you.

Thank you, Greg. I respect you. I admire you. I love you. Because you refuse to compartmentalize your life. Because for you, faith, if it is to matter, has to matter. Because you are passionate about justice, passionate about people, and passionate about God. Thank you.

Thank you, Teri. You have cleaned up our books and tightened up our fiscal procedures, but that is the least of it. You care about me. You care about us. And you have given us, all of us, the wonderful gift of your laughter. Thank you.

Thank you, my church family. You are somehow still putting up with me, after these nineteen years, and you continue to surprise me and to bring me delight with your gifts. You are a gift, a precious gift of God to me, without which, I would not be who I am. And I just hope that in some small way, I have been a gift to you. Thank you.

Thank you, Lord Jesus! Thank you for your faithful witness, for your unwavering obedience all the way, for your extraordinary patience and love, for being a guide to me and to your church, for being a savior to me and to this world, for being my companion along the way, for being Lord of all. Thank you.

And thank you, Lord God. I am in your debt ... for everything. Thank you for truth, for your light that pierces the darkness in our hearts and in this world. Thank you for your way, the way of wholeness, the way of reconciliation, the way of peace. Thank you for life, this life, my life, which is your gift. It is good. I am grateful. I praise and honor you! Thank you.