

“Notes on Thank You Notes”

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Based upon Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19

Where do you fall on the “thank-you” note spectrum?

Do you write them? And do you write them because you love to write them or because your mother’s voice lingers in your ear telling you to write them. With postage so costly, have you opted to send an e-mail expressing your thanks or maybe a twitter that conveniently limits the number of words? Maybe you just remember to say “thank you” when you are moved to express gratitude or when you feel that obligation to acknowledge what someone has done or given.

There’s a member of my family who took two years to write “thank you” notes for her wedding gifts because she wrote such eloquent messages; the kind of note you would put into the drawer and keep. From her description, one could taste the waffles she made with the waffle iron gifted to her. Of course, some people never received a note because she had to move on. After two years, she had a baby and had to start writing “thank-you” notes for those gifts. To this day, on her desk there is a pile of “thank you” notes that she intends to write no matter how far after the event or the gift. We tease her that one-day we are going to bury her with that pile so she can continue writing notes in her eternity.

One woman tells the story of receiving a phone call from her son with the message, “Hey Mom, thanks so much for teaching me to write ‘thank you’ notes. It has paid off. It got me an internship with this professor.” Her jaw dropped and after that call, her comment was, “I didn’t teach him to write ‘thank you’ notes to get something out of it I was trying to teach him about being polite.” Sometimes moms (and dads) just can’t win.

One woman was so incensed that it had been three months and she had not received a “thank you” note from the bride for a wedding gift. Her deadline for receiving notes was 30 days. After that you were considered “rude.” She wrote:

Thank you for inviting us to your lovely wedding. I am writing to make sure you received our gift. If you didn’t can you write and let me know and I’ll arrange for a duplicate to be sent to you. Wishing you every happiness in your marriage.

The bride responded:

I did receive your gift and apologize for not having written a “thank you” note. I made the decision to not write notes because they are expensive and very time consuming. You may, if you wish, send us a duplicate gift or another gift. Wishing you every happiness in your marriage.

Who would every think that the arena of “thank-you” note writing would become a place of passive aggressiveness?

I’ll continue with some notes on thank-you notes, but let’s do it in the context of our story this morning from Luke’s Gospel. There were no ‘thank you’ notes written in this story. It is a healing story, but the essence of this narrative is about **gratitude**.

“We know about gratitude,” you might say. “Check out the hymnbook. We sing about being thankful all the time. We know about those scientific studies that say gratitude reduces blood pressure and extends life. Gratitude is a good thing.”

But maybe there’s more to it, especially from a faith perspective.

Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem. He comes close to Samaria, a territory that strikes caution in anyone from Judea or Galilee. For years scholars have pondered the antagonistic divide between those from Judea and Galilee and the Samaritans. They shared a faith history, yet observant Jews would not go near a Samaritan. They were a despised group, considered to be culturally inferior and religious heretics.

But misery loves company. It did not matter to the ten lepers who shouted out to Jesus that one of them was a Samaritan. It was leprosy and social isolation that bound them together. It’s difficult to exaggerate the social isolation of lepers. They were banished from their homes and from the loving touch of spouses and children. Friendships were a thing of the past. The diseased were required to keep their distance from everyone and if anyone took even one step towards them, they were to yell “Unclean! Unclean!”

They call to Jesus who tells these lepers to go and see a priest because this was the means that they would be able to re-enter their community. The priest was the person that could declare them “clean.” But the Samaritan could not have showed himself to the priest. When they were diseased, they were bound together.

Now, that the ten were clean, the bias and prejudice could re-emerge. His buddies will not be inviting that Samaritan to their house for dinner. If he knows what’s best for him, he will make his way back as quickly as possible to his own people.

But he doesn’t go back to his people right away. He returns to Jesus, praising God, prostrating himself at Jesus’ feet, thanking him. It must have been quite a “thank you” note moment for Jesus.

Jesus tells the Samaritan, “Your faith has made you well.”

This is one of these verses in Scripture that has done as much harm as good. It has been misinterpreted (and I have heard this on pastoral visits) to mean that if we only have more faith or the right kind of faith that our prayers will be answered, that we will get what we want and need.

Let's be clear that is not what Jesus was purporting with his words to the Samaritan. Faith is not cause and effect, like if we do something well enough, God will give us what we want. Haven't you ever known situations where there is a person who lives their faith beyond measure and challenges and hardship keep happening to them. And then there is the most despicable human being you have ever known and they are the ones who get the cures and the breaks, and they have never darkened the doorstep to any faith journey.

Faith is not cause and effect. Jesus is not talking metrics of quantity or quality. Jesus is talking about a realization about what God can do. "You get it, Mr. Samaritan. I don't really know where the other nine are. But you get it."

The Rev. Kimberly Bracken Long has suggested that faith is not just something we have, but the way we live our life, the knowledge of what changes and transforms us.

Jesus' was confirming the gratitude being expressed and claiming that gratitude is essential to faith. You cannot have faith without gratitude.

This Samaritan came back to claim his awareness that God had been an intricate part of being made clean, a healing that went beyond just the physical to the awareness that in God's eyes, he was something bigger, more than a Samaritan leper even a healed one. He was God's child, that was his true identity.

It's important to note that the other nine didn't do anything wrong. In fact, they did exactly as they were told. They went to the priest who could certify their wellness and give them permission to return to their loved ones. Most of us would have been in that group of nine. Can't you just imagine that after all that time in isolation, all you would want to do would be to bounce your way home and touch and hug your loved ones endlessly.

The difference in the one who returned, as the Rev, Dr. David Lose states is that he acknowledged the blessing that comes when we recognize a blessing. If you take any notes today, write that down; **the blessing that comes from recognizing the blessing.** I had to go back to that phrase continuously this week, thinking, what were the words that Rev. Lose wrote; "the blessing that comes with the acknowledgment that we are blessed." It's like a second blessing.

The Way of Gratitude

Now, if the truth be known and if we get practical, I can imagine and you can as well circumstances or possibilities that I don't even want to think about where I would never be able to choke out a "thank you" to God.

So, if gratitude is essential to faith, then how does gratitude play into our faith during difficult, challenging, even horrific circumstances? How are we even to find gratitude in those times?

I went to a memorial service recently for a man in his 50s who died from cancer. His sister gave the eulogy for an older brother who was her life-line, whom she had been closer to than any other person on the planet.

She said that her brother had this remarkable and authentic way of rooting his life in gratitude... even after his diagnosis. "I don't know how he did it with such authenticity," she said. "There were times that we wanted to roll our eyes at Marcus because he always recognized something beyond, which the rest of us couldn't see. We all wished we could have possessed whatever it was that he had that helped him live his life from a perch of thankfulness.

She tells of taking a cycling trip with him and the only reason she went is that she looked up the landscape of the city where they would be riding and saw that it was described in the travel book as flat and gentle rolling hills. She said that it was a total lie and that the travel book's definition of gentle, rolling hills was not hers.

She and her brother got to this hill in the garden district and she looked up and just shook her head. Her brother said, "Hey Shelly, it's not a hill! It's an opportunity."

She commented in her eulogy that without him, there was now a hill before her, an "opportunity" as her brother would call it and she had no earthly idea how she was going to navigate this new hill without her brother by her side. The hill of life without him was more like an insurmountable mountain. But she knew that her brother recognized something bigger than she could see and she was determined to scale this new and scary terrain in hopes that she would find what made him live his life the way he did.

Perhaps gratitude is like love, much more than a feeling and sometimes not a feeling at all, but rather, a way of living; **the blessing that comes from recognizing God's blessing**; that healing is more than healing, that reconciliation is more than reconciliation, that reaching a goal is so much more than just an end game, but also the journey to the goal.

I don't know about you, but I have to admit that often in my prayers I put my list of thanksgivings at the beginning and it's a long list, but then I tend to veer off and let God have it.

Our prayers become requests and laments and endless talking to God about the way we would like things to be. God understands that and even scripture says, "Let your requests be made known to God."

But no wonder Jesus was so taken by the one who returned to offer thanks and to praise God.

There are times in our lives when our prayers can overflow with joy filled gratitude. Our hearts are filled with delight and we are enwrapped with rejoicing.

And there are other times when all that we can utter might be:

“I am feeling anything but thankful right now, God, but I am told over and over again that there is nothing that can separate me from you, and if that is true, I am thankful. Teach me to trust that I will find your presence in this difficult situation.

Or

“I don’t know where you are right now, God. The world’s a mess and I don’t know why you don’t do something about it. But today, I saw something good, something very good. I think you were in that. Perhaps you are doing something about this mess. Thank you, God! So, what do you need me to do?”

Do any of us need to go back to Jesus today to offer gratitude and praise for the one God, who always goes above and beyond? Do we know the blessing that comes from the mere realization that we are abundantly blessed? What would your thank-you note read?

If gratitude is essential to faith, then it seems that gratitude also must mark us as a community of faith. So, stewardship is not fundraising for the church budget. It’s joyful giving, the blessing that comes from recognizing all we have been given comes from God.

The church’s mission is not an ethical duty or obligation to our fellow siblings, but it’s the work of grateful hearts and hands for all that God has done and is doing.

Yes, the world might be a mess at times, but that’s not the final word. God has the final say, and calls us into changing words into actions for the peace that passes all understanding and the hope that is God’s way.

So, as Jesus said many times in his ministry, “Get up and go on your way. It’s your faith that makes you well.” That’s what we are told each Sunday in receiving the charge and the blessing. “Go on your way. Have some donuts and coffee, but go ahead from this place to love and serve the Lord, and we’ll see you next week.”

But before we meet again, remember to go back and see Jesus and bask for a time in gratitude.

For it is in giving thanks, where we become aware that God shows up for us, always has, always will, and God is, indeed, in all things.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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