



“The Cycle of Thanks and Healing”

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2 Kings 5: 9-15c; Luke 17: 11-19

As Halloween approaches, I remember the things from my childhood that scared me the most. There was Godzilla, the giant monster created through a radioactive accident that stomped his way through black and white movies and into my dreams.



And while yes, I had a healthy fear of the wicked witch of the west, what I was ALWAYS was on the lookout for were her flying monkeys.



But my biggest fear, one that plagued me both in my dreams and in the waking hours, was something I feared I'd encounter any moment--the horrible skin disease that ate away at the beautiful faces of the beloved family of Charlton Heston in the movie *Ben Hur*. They had leprosy, and I was terrified.



The obvious lesson from my childhood fears is –don’t’ let your kids watch black and white movies. Though maybe the full color T-Rex in the Jurassic Park movie has given children some sleepless nights, too.

My fears didn’t make any rational sense. Godzilla was not stomping around my childhood neighborhood and no flying monkey has ever swooped down to snatch my little dog, or me. But leprosy, a disfiguring disease that might creep into my world, well, aren’t you a little bit scared of it too?

And so it was in ancient days. Both of today’s scripture lessons tell a story of cleansing, of clearing the body of what was believed to be a highly contagious skin disease. And also of clearing the way for living more fully. The first healing in 2 Kings happens to a mighty warrior, Naaman, thanks to Elisha, a man of God. The second healing in Luke happens to ten societal outcasts, thanks to Jesus, the Messiah. If a third healing were in this morning’s newspaper, the healing would be thanks to a combination of antibiotics and a person in a white coat called a dermatologist.

But like most great stories, these tales are not just about clear skin.

Skin issues are terrible beyond the irritation they cause the afflicted. Nowadays, if you have a flair up of eczema or acne, often the embarrassment about your appearance outweighs the actual physical discomfort. Shame is one of the most powerful evils we combat. Many of our ailments are buried deep within us. What the men in these Bible stories need is healing of their skin. But, of course, real healing is always more than skin deep.

Naaman needs to clear up his skin, but even more so he needs to get over himself. His sense of self-importance is impressive. He doesn’t think he has the “normal” kind of leprosy that could be cured by ritualistic bathing. He’s too big time for that—

he's a victorious warrior after all. He needs a big production, a *kerfuffle*, to conquer his important-guy leprosy and restore his health.

What he gets is a good *diplomatically phrased* talking-to from those close to him. They ask, "Why not try doing what the prophet says? You'd do the big grand act to get cured. Why not try the recommended good soak in the river?" Naaman shrugs his shoulders, takes a dip, and yes, this mighty all-important warrior's skin gets better. And there's even better news: the healing powers penetrate deeper than his skin. Naaman learns that he isn't "all that," a person who must have special treatment. Naaman learns that the whole world doesn't revolve around him. He figures out that the right thing to do is to say to Elisha, "Thank you. I couldn't do this on my own. God did this for me. I will worship only God because of my gratitude."

The mighty warrior grows powerful enough to conquer his own giant ego. And with those words of thanks, he is truly healed.

Our story from Luke is also a tale of healing. Jesus has mercy on the lepers and does two things for them: gives them clean skin and restores them to their community. It is the priest who can give these ten men permission to return to their families, to move back home. These men will have clean skin but more importantly, they will be invited back into their former lives.

Nine of the lepers who are healed en route to the priest do as they were told, they continue toward the temple. But this tenth leper, this Samaritan, a foreigner who is uninformed in Jewish tradition and may not even know his way to the temple, he responds differently. He perceives that his skin is suddenly clear. His nerve pain is gone. He will soon be able to return to his family, his community and be part of something bigger than this horrible disease. And he is overwhelmed with a feeling of gratitude.

This 10<sup>th</sup> leper turns back to Jesus. To turn means to repent. It is to shift directions: literally changing your course, and spiritually, changing the course of your life.

The 10 lepers are "made clean" which is an amazing miracle. But this foreigner, this Samaritan leper, is "made well." This is the same "made well" that the hemorrhaging woman gets in Luke 8. The same "made well" as the sinful woman who uses her hair to clean the feet of Jesus in Luke 7. Made *clean* is a surface

experience. Made **well** is more than skin deep. Made well means healed, through and through.

Is this leper “made well” because he made Jesus feel good? Did his thanks allow Jesus to puff out his chest and say to all who would listen: “Hey, look what I did? Aren’t I great?”

No. The gratitude expressed by this 10<sup>th</sup> leper did not change Jesus. It changed the leper himself.

To be grateful means to recognize a power beyond your own self. It means that you are not in control of everything. Gratitude is an admission of God’s grace.

Theologians Fred Craddock and Eugene Boring write, “To be saved is not only to be healed and forgiven but to be delivered from the self-centeredness that inhibits grateful praise.”<sup>1</sup>

Does acknowledging the power of someone else, does saying “Thank you!” diminish who you are? Or does it take courage, does it show growth to name the truth that we don’t do it all ourselves? It takes a tremendous amount of bravery to admit vulnerability. To admit we are beholden to someone for something. And that’s one of the first acts we do as Christians. We put our trust, our very lives, in the hands of God. In proclaiming our faith we say “thank you” for God’s claim on our lives. We say thank you for being breathed into existence and for the promise of life to come. When we proclaim our faith, our reliance on God, we are revealing the courage it takes to roll over and expose our soft underbelly. To unclench our hands and fold them into prayer. To drop our defiant chins and bow our heads, all in gratitude to our Creator for amazing grace.

“Grace cannot be [earned or created or] calculated; grace is always amazing grace.”<sup>2</sup>

“*Grace* and *gratitude* . . . [come] from the same root [word]. [S]o there can be no awareness of grace without gratitude, no gratitude without an awareness of grace.”<sup>3</sup> The leper said thank you to Jesus for clear skin. More than that, the

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Samaritan leper said thank you for Christ's generous act of reaching across boundaries and healing him, a Samaritan, a foreigner, and offering him unqualified mercy.

C.S. Lewis, a theologian who wrote the popular book and now movie *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, made many observations about his newly found Christian faith. He "observed the connection between gratitude and personal well-being. 'I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most: while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.'"<sup>4</sup>

It's a bit of a chicken-and-egg question: which came first—the gratitude or the well-being? If things are good for you and you recognize it's a gift, you are grateful. And science has confirmed over and over again that grateful people are healthier people.<sup>5</sup> And when you are healthier, physically, mentally and emotionally, you are more grateful. Which makes you more healthy. And so on and so on.

This healing-gratitude loop is true for individuals and also for congregations. Rev. Dr. Kimberly Bracken Long writes, "...[G]ratitude changes the character of a congregation. When Christians practice gratitude, they come to worship not just to 'get something out of it,' but to give thanks and praise to God. Stewardship is transformed from fundraising [a giving because you "have to"] to the glad gratitude of joyful givers [a happy response to grace]. The mission of the church changes from ethical duty to the work of grateful hands and hearts."<sup>6</sup>

And what's good for the individual and congregation is also good for the world. How can our gratitude translate into healing and wholeness beyond ourselves? Beyond our family, our church, our country? How does our Christian identity, living in a posture of gratitude, call us to live and advocate as global citizens?

The leper who turned back to say "thank you" was a Samaritan, a foreigner, an "other." Jesus, the teacher, surely gestured to this man, looked at his followers, and said in so many words, "THIS is how you do it. This is how you live life. You

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<sup>4</sup> John Buchanan in *Feasting On The Word, Year C, Volume 4*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-mentally-strong-people-dont-do/201504/7-scientificall-proven-benefits-gratitude>, October 12, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Kimberly Bracken Long in *Feasting On The Word*, p. 168.

receive grace and mercy and you respond in gratitude. And you are made whole. This is how you stumble your way to salvation.”

These stories about a full-of himself conqueror who learns humility and a foreigner grateful for mercy could be on our nightly news. Keep your eyes and ears open. Look for stories of courage: people who have enough courage to acknowledge the need for grace and mercy. Enough courage to work together rather than dominate. Enough courage to be mightily vulnerable. We follow a Messiah who carried his own cross. We worship a savior who as He died said, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Know that our God heals pompous warriors and outcast foreigners. Not just their skin condition but their hearts. And if we are brave enough to admit we can use a little help, our God will heal us too. Through and through. And we can be grateful. Amen.