

In a small village in Turkey, scores of people wait every day for the single bus that's supposed to stop, on its way to far-off Ankara, and, eventually on to even-farther-off Istanbul. Patiently, they wait, hoping but not knowing for sure if they'll be able to get on it, because many will have already boarded it, and there may be no seats left. They may get on today, or may be put on a waitlist for the next day, or the next, or even the next.

Worse, they've no way to know if it'll even arrive that day; it may break down before it gets there.

I can imagine those ten ragged rejects in today's gospel passage, viewing Jesus in some ways like those Turkish villagers who've been wait-listed day after day, must view a long-awaited bus.

Dressed in rags, dirty, stinky, covered with sores, and pushed to the fringes of society, consigned by the law to live "outside the camp," their only community was with others who shared their affliction, a bond so strong that it transcended even the hatred between Jews and Samaritans. Adding to their humiliation, was their duty to cover their mouth while crying out the self-damning words, "unclean!"

As Jesus passes by, they approach him yet keep their distance, and voice their long repressed hope, calling out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Jesus responds by telling them to go and show themselves to the priests, who alone had the authority to declare them "clean," and grant them the right to re-enter the community. They obey. And, "as they went, they were made clean." Jesus offers healing power and a miracle happens!

But that physical healing is not the only miracle.

Suddenly, one of them turns, and runs back to Jesus, shouting out a storm of praise. He falls before Jesus in adoration, two words flowing like a mantra from his lips, "Thank you! Thank you!"

The others go on, glad to be healed, but with no thought of giving thanks.

They'd all been physically healed, but it's only to this one Samaritan who returned, that Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well!"

What is Jesus talking about? To our way of thinking they'd all been healed, "made well;" their leprosy was gone! Why does Jesus say that there's something about this Samaritan's "faith" that had taken him beyond physical healing and truly made him "well," fully whole?

Well, what kind of "faith" did the Samaritan show? It's not faith as we usually define it; it's trust, because he didn't do anything different from the others *before* he was healed. No, the only thing different about him is what he does *after* he was healed. He comes back in gratitude to say, "thanks!" What separates this man from the others whom Jesus cured, is his gratitude and his eagerness to express it to the one who had bestowed the blessing.

We tend to think of this healing in personal terms. The disease that had racked the man's body was gone. But for him, another, deeper, inner healing had happened.

Jesus wanted to make the lepers whole by restoring them to community. He knows that people were not weren't meant to live alone. They were meant for life together, in community. So he takes away the reason for the leper's exile. By healing them he offers a way to be restored to full citizenship in the community from which they'd been cast out.

But his words to the one who returned, "Your faith has made you well." tell us something important. He is saying, "your gratitude and thanksgiving have made you whole." Wholeness includes being fit for life in community. Without gratitude, we take what God gives as if it's our due. And when we do that, we're likely to use it for ourselves, without thought for God or others, in ways that show no care

for the community in which God wants us to share life, and find fullness of life.

That's a central reason why we come together to worship. God calls us together to be a faith family, but we can't be that family, if we don't learn to be grateful and to express our gratitude to God in thanks-giving. Worship is our chance to do that!

People may say "I don't get anything out of worship!" But you know what, that's not why we're here! We're here to express gratitude for all God's already given us gives us. We don't come here to "get" something. We come because we've already been given so much and we're grateful, and need to express that gratitude in thanks and praise and in sharing some of the blessings God's given us.

In today's world, we look at everything, we do everything with an eye to "getting something out of it," so we even get the focus of worship backwards. But in truth, the focus is not on getting something for ourselves but giving something to God – our thanks and praise!

When we're focused on God, we come to understand not only that everything isn't about us, but that it's very much about others. We come to see that God wants us to have a "life together" that's good and whole. That means that God wants us to have a "life-together" where everybody's needs are met, and those waiting for hope will find it fulfilled. That can only happen if we're grateful for the blessings we've received and want to share them, and hold each other in our hearts and minds, and yes, also, in our prayers.

Long before Jesus met those ten lepers, Jeremiah sent a letter to another group of exiles, the Hebrews who were captive in far-away Babylon. Though they longed for home, Jeremiah gave them startling advice; he tells them to make peace with the foreign city, come to terms with life there, learn to accept it, and thrive in that strange land.

He says, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have children; multiply there, do not decrease." But most shockingly, he tells them to pray for Babylon, saying, "Seek the welfare of the city and pray on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." In other words, look for blessing where you don't expect it, and seek blessing for those whom you might count as enemies.

What an amazing statement! Babylon had overrun and plundered the Hebrew's homeland, taken them into exile in a land where their faith and values were objects of ridicule. Just last Sunday, we heard of the Babylonians taunting the dejected Hebrews, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion," and how the Hebrews would not let their God be mocked and, so, refused to sing.

So, is Jeremiah saying, "Go ahead; be assimilated into that culture? Not at all! He's saying they can be true to God and stand up for their faith, without becoming obsessed with revenge against Babylon. If they live for revenge, in the end, they'll only hurt themselves. Their future is tied up in the good of Babylon, and the good of all people. That's what they're to pray for.

We may have impulses similar to those exiles. Anger toward family, school, company, community, or church, may take us beyond standing up for faithfulness, into vengeance, into seeking to hurt those with whom we're angry. So, we turn away, withdraw, drop out, stop giving. And, yes, that may hurt those with whom we're angry, but it also hurts us, because it cuts us off from the community through which God wants to bless us, and in which God wants us to share those blessings. If our anger is not moderated by gratitude for the blessings God continues to give, if it's not tempered by a sharing in God's hope of blessing all people, we hurt ourselves. We were made for community, and we can't have the blessing of a community we're living to hurt.

That same commitment – to the health and well-being of every person and to the wholeness of the community – was expressed over 500 years later in Jesus’ healing of the lepers. The path to that wholeness for all is the same - gratitude for God’s blessings, giving thanks for them, and wanting all people to share in them, even those we count as enemies. Because, we know, deep down, that in the life together God wants for us, no one should be left out.

God enables Jeremiah to see that any human community, Babylon as well as Jerusalem, has potential to nurture life. By urging the exiles not only to adjust in Babylon but even to pray for it, Jeremiah breaks new ground. No earthly authority – even that of powerful, oppressive Babylon – can thwart God’s will, and no earthly city – not even the city of David – can be the heavenly city without God willing it.

As the psalmist says, "God is in the midst of the city and intends to save it." God’s is wherever people live together and God wants them to have life!

Imagine the “life together” of God’s dreams!

- where people can thrive, have homes and jobs, children are cared for, and community is made whole by including those once left out.
- where no one is wait-listed for hope, no one’s aspirations for fullness of life are put on hold.
- where gratitude for God’s blessings tames the anger, jealousy, and desires for revenge that create such violence and brokenness between us!
- where gratitude for God’s blessings fosters a care and generosity that sees that the welfare of one is found in the welfare of all!

In that dream, we find ourselves drawn together, no longer strangers, but one community where life’s promises and struggles are shared.

In that dream, we belong – all of us – to a new reality that is good, because it is God’s reality.

And, in that dream, there’s always room on the bus, and the bus always works, and it always gets us where God wants us to go!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

God of Abundant Blessing,

We are here again, reading about the wholeness you give, and yet focusing on our brokenness;  
...hearing of your incredible provision, and dwelling on what we lack;  
...talking about your healing without believing that it applies to our lives, our pain, and our needs.  
So, with our vision stuck on what we don't have, we are empty of gratitude.

Admitting to you our stuck-ness of our vision, we ask for the gift of new sight.

We ask that you to help us see, first of all, the gift of life, the gift of this day.  
Help us to seek that this is the day you have made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
Help us to be glad that we have come into your house,  
...to have this opportunity to give you thanks and praise for all your goodness to us.

We thank you for the many blessings you shower on us every day, and we pray for eyes to see them,  
...minds to remember them, and hearts to be grateful for them,  
...so we might live with the gratitude that makes us want to give you thanks and praise,  
...the gratitude that brought the one in ten that was healed running back to Jesus to say "thank you,"  
...the kind of gratitude that led Jesus to say to him, "Your faith has made you well."

For we know that we need to be well in that way, fully whole, and fit for community,  
...able to see all you've given and be grateful for it,  
...rather than focusing on what we don't have and resent what others have,  
...living in jealousy and competition with them.

Nurture this gratitude in us, we pray.

Foster an awareness of all you've given us, that will help us care more about what others don't have,  
...all around the world.

Seeking to grow in that compassionate awareness,  
...we pray for our brothers and sisters in faith around the world,  
...who are seeking to be faithful to you, and witnessing to your love,  
...often in very trying or even dangerous circumstances.

We pray for the poor, hungry, and homeless, and those who suffer any form of oppression.  
For these we pray, that they might receive justice, that their burdens might be lifted,  
...and that those who've held on to more than their fair share of your abundance,  
...would be moved to let go of some of it, and so have more of the true life you intend for all.

With these hopes we pray for those known to us with special needs...