

Salem Lutheran Church

Pastor Jon Enter

SalemLutheran.org

Theme: An Attitude of Gratitude

Text: Luke 17:11-19

Greg Pickering was 55-years-old when it happened. He was swimming in Western Australia, when he was attacked by a great white shark. It bit him in the head and the face. Somehow he escaped. Some men in a nearby fishing boat picked him up, rushed him to shore, and got him to the hospital where he went through surgery that lasted 10 hours. He survived. But he'll never get one of his eyes back.

For many people, a traumatic experience like that would be enough to keep them out of the water forever. But Greg isn't like many people. After the accident he told reporters he couldn't wait to get back in the water again. And you knew he was serious, because that was the second time a shark attacked him. 20 years earlier, a shark bit him twice – in the shin and the calf - while he was spearfishing. Nothing, not even being attacked by sharks twice, has kept him from something he's enjoyed for so long.

But not everyone's as fortunate. Some people, no matter how badly they would want to, simply can't jump back in the water and experience things that once brought them so much pleasure. Not when you were downsized from the job you loved or cheated on by someone you once believed was going to love you more than anyone. After your home is broken into, it's a little harder to sleep at night – in the one place that's supposed to make you feel more peaceful and comfortable than anything. For some, what's keeping their heart from diving into abundant joy is bouts of depression, health problems, the loss of a loved one, a grudge someone is holding against you, or one you're holding against them. Regardless, it's not easy for everyone to just jump back in the water as if nothing ever happened.

In fact, for ten men in our sermon, it was impossible. These ten men had leprosy. Leprosy was a horrible and very contagious skin disease that caused numbness, paralysis, and loss of body tissue (even without a shark biting you). Because of how contagious it was, anyone with leprosy was immediately expelled many miles outside the city to leper colonies, where they were separated from their loved ones. Since there was no cure, once a person got leprosy, they usually never saw their family again. All ten of these men lost all the things that had brought them so much joy for so long and they knew they'd never have again.

But then they met Jesus, who taught them two things: 1) The horrible things that keep us from our greatest joy and peace aren't as powerful as we lead ourselves to believe. 2) Just because you've been set free from a burden like leprosy doesn't mean you're back on the path to joy and peace.

Leprosy does still exist in the world today. Somewhere between 2-3 million people in the world have leprosy, which is now curable. Although, because medicine isn't readily available in every country, it's estimated there are still 1000s leper colonies throughout the world. And there are even more if you count the number of people who feel like they're in a leper colony, but don't actually have leprosy. They're lepers in the sense that they feel separated from people they'd love to be in contact with.

How many high school students wander the hallways every day wishing they were a little more visible to certain people, groups, or teams? How many wives every day wish their husbands paid more attention to them? How many children long for just one complementary word from mom instead of being yelled at all the time, or for more than the one weekend a month they get to spend with dad? How many elderly sit in their rooms every day wondering if the phone will ever ring or if someone will come to visit them? You don't need to be a leper to feel lonely or to have an unmet longing to be loved. You just need to be human. But there was one way these ten lepers were different from any of those others.

Lepers back then were required to remind people never to come near them. In the Old Testament, when someone got leprosy, not only were they sent to the leper colony, they were required to wear torn clothes. They couldn't cut or comb their hair. They had to constantly cover their faces. And if anyone wasn't turned off enough by the sight of this scraggly-looking group of sickly-looking men, if anyone got too close, they had to yell, "Unclean, unclean!" They had to scream at the top of their lungs the worst thing about them so that nobody would even be tempted to go near them.

What would you have to yell? If you had to yell the worst thing about you every time someone got too close to your personal space, what would that be? I'm guessing you've never done that because, unlike the lepers, we have a choice. And the reason we choose to keep quiet about the worst things about each of our lives is because we're afraid of what people would think of us if they really knew what kind of sins we get passionate about. We keep quiet about those things because we're afraid that even the people who love us now, wouldn't anymore, if they knew the truth about who we are.

The lepers, though, had no choice, which is why they cried out to Jesus. They asked him to have pity. Asking someone to have pity on you isn't asking them to overlook or ignore anything. It's inviting them to know everything – all the disease, all the dirt, all the worst things – and begging them to love you anyway. And after Jesus did, are you surprised that nine of the ten lepers never thanked him for it?

Several years ago, there was a story about a boy who had been abducted from his home in Florida. He was abducted while his dad was at work and held captive for 13 years. The kidnapper took this boy from city to city and

state to state, trying to keep their location hidden from the boy's father. And the kidnapper did a good job of this for over a decade until the boy who had been missing for 13 years was found in Missouri. If you were that boy, and it had been 13 years since you'd been home, 13 years since you'd slept in your own bed and felt safe in your father's strong arms, where is the first place you would want to go? I think I'd want to go home.

We don't know for how long these ten men had had leprosy, but we do know that Jesus didn't heal them immediately. He didn't come up to them and touch them and immediately take their leprosy away. He sent them away to the priest so that, when they noticed they were healed, they were some distance from the man who healed them, and some distance closer to what? To their families and their homes. There were in a position where they had to choose – where is the first place they want to go. Nine of them chose to run straight home. And maybe you don't blame them. But Jesus didn't commend the faith of any of them.

He commended the one who sought first the man who healed him, who loved what Jesus did for him more than anything; which is exactly how the Bible describes the only acceptable attitude toward God. **“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.”** **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.”** And you might say, “Well, I show that I do by listening to Jesus and following his instructions.” But all ten listened to Jesus when he instructed them to go show themselves to the priest. Only one leper returned to say thanks, which Jesus pointed out was proof of his faith. Jesus knew he had faith because, all on his own without anyone telling him to, he said thanks. Faith expresses itself in thanksgiving to God.

Think about what Jesus was allowing all ten lepers to do again. He was sending all ten back to their homes, back to wearing their own clothes, back to the pleasure of eating a meal together with their family, back to fixing up their houses, meeting with friends, and playing with and providing for their children; back to the ability to hug their wives whenever they wanted. In other words, he gave them back the things ... most of us have never lost.

When was the last time you thanked God for the pleasure of eating a meal together with your family, wearing your own clothes, sitting down in your own home and watching TV, for being able to do chores around the house, fix a toy for your children, or meet a friend for coffee? I'm not asking you about the last time you *did* those things, but when was the last time you thanked God for the *ability* to do them – to hug someone you love whenever you wanted? What does that mean if we never do? Doesn't that reveal what's in our hearts? The first thing this man did was thank God for giving him the ability to do so many things so many people every day take for granted.

Sheryl Pik wasn't a leper. But she still knew how it felt to expect that she would never see the people she loves ever again. Sheryl was diagnosed with

cervical cancer. She tried to fight it with chemotherapy and radiation but stopped when the doctors told her it was no longer helping. She was moved to hospice care, where she basically just slept a lot. She was so weak she couldn't stand for more than a few minutes at a time. And yet, on September 28th, she got up out of her hospice bed, put on a dress and a blonde wig, and down to the end of the hall, outside the front entrance, and all the way down to the gazebo by the lake because that's where Jeffrey was waiting. Jeffrey was her fiancé, and he was waiting there – to marry her. That day. She was in hospice. Her life was ending. There are other things her weak body wanted her to be doing. But she had one opportunity to be with a man who obviously loved her. And she wasn't going to pass it up for anything.

Just like the one leper wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to say thanks to someone who was willing to be there for him in his weakest and ugliest moment; someone who one day also got himself up – not from a hospice bed – but from the ground the whip had buried him in, wearing only the blood that was pouring out of him and a crown of thorns on top of him, and walked down a dirt road, outside the city limits, and all the way up a skull-shaped mountain because that's where a cross was waiting. It was waiting there – to kill him. That day. He was the Son of God, the ever-living, with nothing to hide. And his life was ending. There were other things his weak body wanted him to be doing. But he had the opportunity to have pity on a whole world and set it free from a disease far worse than leprosy. He had one opportunity to forgive you of everything and guaranty that there is nothing in all creation – no leprosy, disease, trial, hardship, pain, or sin – that can now separate you from one day diving straight into a joy and pleasure with him we can't even imagine. He wasn't going to pass it up for anything.

I don't know if this one leper knew all the things this man who healed him would one day do for all God's children. But we do. So don't pass up this opportunity to thank him. In the back of every hymnal is a thank-you card. I want you to take it out, and I want you to write a thank-you to God for just one thing. We'll post all our cards in the lobby before next Sunday.

I want you to know that what you have just done is something Jesus values more than anything. He values your faith, and every little way you put it into practice: a simple word of thanks; a prayer before every meal, thanking God for his goodness; a short sentence you use to point out God's generosity to your children; every time you flee from temptation or bake a treat to share on Sunday morning; Those are the things for which Jesus gives thanks. Your small acts of faith that often nobody sees and nobody notices cause more rejoicing in heaven than any of us could ever imagine. So **“rise and go,”** Jesus tells his thankful disciples, **“your faith has made you well.”** Rise and go – go and be thankful, and never again feel alone. Amen.

GROWTH GROUPS QUESTIONS

Luke 17:11-19

GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

When you were a child, what was the worst sickness you had to endure?

INTO THE WORD

What do you know about the disease of leprosy?

Why do you think Jesus didn't immediately heal the lepers but had them be cleansed along the way?

Why did Jesus tell them to go show themselves to the priests?

What was the added benefit for the one former leper who returned to thank Jesus?

Jesus replied to the one thankful leper. **“Rise and go, your faith has made you well.”** What's the difference between “well” and “healed”?

INTO MY LIFE

The ten lepers cried out for Jesus to have pity (other translations = “have mercy”) on them. What are some times in life when someone might ask for mercy?

Why do we sometimes forget to tell someone thanks?

If you lost next year anything you didn't thank God for during this year, what would you have left?

When the one healed leper returned, the text tells us he was **“praising God in a loud voice.”** When have you praised God in a loud voice?

Who is someone that you can text right now (or immediately at the end of your Growth Group) to specifically thank for being a blessing to you?

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