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top

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for not
being thankful

IT HAS BEEN a regular on the David Letterman Show for some time. It all began back in September of 1985 with a skit making fun of People Magazine's 'Top Ten worst dressed list'. Letterman took this to a new level with such lists as 'Top Ten signs your kid had a bad day

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at school to Top Ten rejected James Bond gadgets or more recently, Top Ten questions to ask yourself before marrying Michael Jackson and Top Ten signs your teams is not going to win the World series. With this in mind, if Letterman was a religious man, I'm sure he would have included this morning's story in his Top Ten list ... Top Ten reasons why we don't say thank you.

You know the Ten Leper's story. It is a favourite among many. Jesus was travelling and a group of lepers, who had heard about his miracles wanted a piece of the action. Jesus, master, have mercy upon us. This was their first and only interaction with him, and Luke writes, for Jesus, that was enough. He called back, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." In the Greek, the word 'well' can equally be translated as 'whole' and that is the approach which most commentators take. There was a wholeness about this Samaritan for he was able to link the head and the heart, the gratitude with the healing, the gift and the Giver.

The Samaritan is the good guy in the story, but somehow, my mind and, to some degree, my heart, goes out to the other nine. They too experienced the healing but they didn't know how to handle it. They ended up rushing around in a myriad of directions not sure what to do or when to do it but I'm sure they all had at least ten good reasons for not saying thank you that day.

It is hard for us to imagine how devastating Leprosy must be. Little by little it destroys physical feature after physical feature, limb

after limb. One watches their body dying even through the mind is very much alive. Moreover, because it was thought that leprosy was contagious, those with this illness were alienated from their families, ostracised from their communities and forced to live in caves and dwellings far from civilization. The book of Leviticus records the following: The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

To some degree, this was a form of death sentence. Once diagnosed, life would never again be the same, separated from all you knew and loved. Yet, in another way, I wonder if such places are among the few where true community is found. You see, the distinctions, the 'isms' in life have no place there. So often, illness knows no bounds. Ask the cancer patient about the community found in a hospital cancer ward or the recovering alcoholic about the support received at an AA meeting. It is not so much that misery loves company as it is, in the company of others with a similar plight, strength, empathy and understanding can be found. Men and women standing side by side was

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a rarity in Jesus' day. Jews and Samaritan avoided one another at all costs. The slaves and the free, the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate all lived in different worlds. These artificial barriers which we so often erect separate humanity from humanity and are stripped away when there is a common need, a common belief which united us. As terrible as leprosy was and is, we can learn something about those things that really matter by looking inside such colonies.

These ten lepers all knew the law and they acted out their part. When they saw Jesus passing by on the border between Galilee and Nazareth, they cried out to him as they probably cried out to all passers-by, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

Perhaps they had heard of Jesus, for his three years of ministry had touched and changed the lives of thousands in that area. Or perhaps they were just asking of Jesus the same as they asked from others who passed down that busy byway ... food, clothing, money, anything that would help them survive. Yet what they got was so much more. Luke writes, 'When Jesus saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.' Their blotched skin became smooth, deformed limbs took on new shape. Their crutches were thrown aside, bandages fell off lingering sores and slings torn off and cast far away from their bodies. The law still required that they go to the priest for verification and validation but each one

knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they were healed, cleaned. They were made new and while one returned to give God thanks and nine went away.

Why didn't all ten return? Would not all be thankful? What prohibited most from expressing it, from giving thanks to Jesus? What prohibits us from giving thanks to God? What would be on their Top Ten list for reasons not to show gratitude?

Now, I hope you will allow me plenty of license here as I postulate upon these excuses, the thoughts which might have been going through their minds or even ours when such blessings fall upon us. What were their excuses? What are ours?

First, perhaps one didn't give thanks because

1. No one told him to

We do that with our children. 'What do you say?' we ask after a caring word or gesture is directed toward them. If Jesus would have asked the Dr Phil question, 'Now how does that make you feel', I'm sure we would have heard much adulation. But he didn't ask. He just healed and offered wholeness. He just reached out to others at their point of need expecting nothing in return. Jesus knew, we know, that giving thanks, should never be reduced to duty or obligation. Then it becomes contrived. Rather it should be a natural response, a gesture of gratitude, an acknowledgement of blessings that swells up from within. We should not need to be told to be thankful. It should just be part of who we are!

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Second, perhaps it was because

2. Jesus was one of their own

It is safe to assume that the majority who were healed that day, like Jesus, were Jews. The one who turned back and gave thanks was a Samaritan, a non believer in the traditional sense, a heretic in Hebraic thought. How you ever noticed how we can be nicer to people we don't know than those we do? We will thank the grocery clerk from whom we buy our groceries, but how often do we thank the one who prepared the meal for us? We will hold a door open for a stranger but tell our loved one to get in themselves. It is so easy to fall into the trap of familiarity. I remember a groom once saying to me after the wedding, I'm so happy that we're married ... now I don't need to keep up trying to impress her! My friend, I said, this is only day one, but I would hope, for your sake, that the trying to impress one another days have just begun!

It was the Samaritan, the stranger, who went back to say thank you to Jesus. His fellow Jews, those he went to Sabbath school or played with on the dusty streets in their youth didn't bother. They just expected it. Do we take God for granted, faith for granted, the people and the blessings of each day as what we deserve rather than that with which we have been blessed.

I wonder if at least one of the lepers yelled out,

3. 'He told us to go to the priest.'

Jesus did say that. The law demanded it .

The healing would not be complete without this priestly blessing. Yet I believe there are times when the law can get in the way of the spirit. Do we put things over people, edicts over feelings, or as St. Paul writes, flesh over spirit. As Christians we recognize the 'Thou shall nots in the Old Testament but we need to balance them with the hope and promise of abundant living in the New. We can become so governed by task that we miss the people who stand before us, so obsessed by what the Word says that we forget that in Jesus, 'the word became flesh' and when that happens our religion becomes rules and we cease to be thankful.

I'm sure there was probably a leper or two who said

4. I just want to go home

They wanted to leave their past behind, see their family, hug their children, to be reunited with community, simply take back life. Grief counsellors write that people often become so busy after the death of a loved one that they do not take the time needed to grieve and that it can hit them six months or even a year or two after the fact. We need to acknowledge life's changes, be they good or bad if we wish to move on and sometimes it takes real concentration to do this. We cannot live tomorrow without first coming to grips with the reality of today. That is the wholeness of which Jesus speaks. It is more than physical healing. It is spiritual healing for without both, we all miss out .

There was most probably at least one leper

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who thought

5. 'I don't know what to say'

so I'll said nothing at all. There are moments like that, when we feel speechless, totally overwhelmed and awed by the experience. Everything we think or try to say comes out wrong.

I am sometimes tempted to write a book on some of the things I've heard people say in funeral homes ... oh he looks so natural, I like what they did with her hair, well, at least now that he's dead, you can travel again or I like your choice of casket!

Yes, we can say the wrong or inappropriate things, yet is it ever wrong to say thank you for a life, a healing, an act of caring. It is ever inappropriate to utter a word of gratitude, of praise, for, with these ten lepers, life was made new.

I am almost willing to bet that there were the lepers who thought,

6. 'I'll do it later'

That would be me. Intentions are good but follow up is lousy! I'll get right to it ... next week, which stretches to next month which can stretch to not at all! I'll do it when I have time. I will get around to it really soon. I'll get back to you on that. Yet, there is nothing in life more illusive to us than tomorrow for it remains a day away, and when that day comes, we are often as busy as we were on the one just passed.

Moreover, time can quickly slip by so that, when we do get around to it, it feels too late

and we are embarrassed to go back. Missed opportunities are the ones that get away because we live under the illusion that there will always be time to do it later.

Yet, when we think about it, thanks doesn't need to take long. The Samaritan didn't say much. He didn't need to. Luke writes he fell on his face and thanked Jesus. No big words, flattery cards, grandiose motions were necessary to impress; just a simple thank you! One returned to give God thanks but nine had excuses not to.

Perhaps there was the leper who

7. Never even thought of going back

Perhaps he felt he deserved to be healed. It is not what we can contribute to life. It is what we can take from it. It is not what we owe others. It is what the world owe us! Such an attitude truly robs us of the fullness of life for it is in consoling that we find consolation, in giving that we receive and in dying that we are born to eternal life. Taking the time to say thank you, acknowledging the blessings that are ours, is not only good and healing for the giver but also for the one who receives.

And then, perhaps there was the leper who

8. Wasn't sure if he was thankful for this healing

As terrible as leprosy was, there were also some side benefits. There was acceptance in this inclusive leper's colony and few societal expectations. Life was tough, but there was a routine, an order to life. I have talked with

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folk who have completed the 28-day AA recovery program but who did not want to leave the treatment centre when the program was over, with inmates who were not sure they wanted parole, with some unemployed who questioned returning to the work place, with some battered women who found it less scary to suffer abuse than to leave the relationship. It was not that any of these necessarily liked the situation they were; it was that they were afraid of the unknown. The fear of the unknown, of leaving the familiar to move into the insecurity of the future, can be paralyzing. As a leper I know what is expected of me but if I am made well, those expectations may increase. Thankfulness can be tempered by fear.

Now for those of you who are counting, you will be pleased to know that the sermon is almost over for I have finally reached leper number nine

9. Fill in your own.....

What is it that prevents your thankfulness, that limits your gratitude? Is it one of the eight previously mentioned or is it another ... perhaps tensions in a relationship which gets in the way of honest feelings, busyness which does not allow time for it, perhaps it is just not something which you have stopped and think about?

And so we come to number ten

10. The only thing that stands between you and God, between you and gratitude, is you

The excuses we make are just that, they are walls which we erect in our lives that rob us of wholeness and abundant living! Like the Psalmist, open yourselves to the blessings of God, the wonder of Creation, the strength of faith. Like the words of Jeremiah, even if in exile and things are not all that you have hoped for, embrace this gift of life, build houses, plant gardens, learn to live, not with excuses but gratitude for this will make the world a far different place. And when we do, Jesus says to us, “now get up and go on your way, for your faith, your thanksgiving has made you whole.” Thanks be to God.

Biblical References

Luke 17:11-19

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