I'm a summer kind of person. I love being out in the warm sun, gardening and walking and watching the butterflies dance around the bushes I have planted to attract them. Fall and winter really aren't seasons I enjoy, except for the month of October and the first week in November. I love this time of year, not because of cooler days or pumpkins or because I look forward to getting out my sweaters and jackets, but because this is major league baseball playoff and World Series time. I love baseball so much I would willingly put on as many clothes as I had to to go see a playoff or World Series game in chilly Chicago or Boston.

In the playoffs, the managers of each team get two challenges per game, rather than the one they have during the regular season. A challenge gives a manager the right to question the call of an umpire on a play on the field, not for balls and strikes to a batter. When a challenge is made, an independent official, who is in an office in New York, uses instant replay to review the play and either confirms the call of the umpire or overturns it. While everyone is waiting for that decision, commentators on TV are looking at the play from many different angles to try to decide if the umpire was right or not. It's amazing how different, say, a tag at second base can look at a variety of angles. One view shows the shortstop clearly tagging the runner out while another raises the questions of whether the runner was tagged on the arm before his foot hit the base. I like the challenges because in a game where the stakes are high, it gives the umpires and the fans the chance to consider that the play might really have happened differently than it seemed at first glance and in real time.

One of the cool things about reading the Bible is that there is no limit to the number of challenges and replays we get. At different times in our lives or in new circumstances we are free to read a particular passage or book of the Bible and see it from a new or different angle. That's how God's word works. It's never stagnant, never just words on a page, but the living, breathing presence of God among us, coming to us new each time we read it or hear it. This is not to say that God changes to suit our whims or circumstances. Rather, we are the ones who are changed by things we never noticed before, by insights we never grasped, by nuances we never considered.

We just heard one of the Bible's most familiar passages. Like you, I've heard this story countless times throughout my life but in this latest reading, God showed me something I hadn't seen before. In all my other readings, I saw this as a story of right and wrong, of gratitude and ingratitude. Ten lepers come to Jesus as he arrives in a village between Samaria and Galilee. They don't come too close, because lepers are used to keeping their distance. No one wants them near enough to catch their terrible disease so the lepers have to yell so that Jesus can hear their cries for help. Jesus doesn't mess around. He tells the lepers to go and show themselves to the priests and so, with nothing to lose, the lepers do just that. Before they even reach the priests, the lepers are healed. One of them decides to go back to the village where Jesus is, to thank him for this great gift.

And this is where the lesson of the story is revealed, I used to think. Ten men were healed but only one came back to thank Jesus. One right, nine wrong; one good, nine bad, a .100 batting average if you put it in baseball terms. Jesus does seem upset that the other nine lepers didn't come back to thank him. I always interpreted that to mean I should strive to act like the one leper who returned to Jesus, so as not to disappoint Jesus or incur his wrath. But notice this: Jesus never told the ten lepers to come back and thank him. He never says he's going to make the other nine lepers sick again. He makes good on his promise to heal all of them and in doing that, enables the most dramatic change the lepers could ever have imagined. They no longer have to live in isolation beyond the outskirts of their town. They are reunited with their families and their communities and are free to live in relationship with those they love, much like prisoners who return home after a long jail sentence. Because Jesus heals them, the former lepers can have jobs, can provide for their families, can have full and satisfying lives.

We don't know if the nine who didn't come back found some way to thank Jesus. Perhaps they prayed to God, thanking God for the gift of new life. Maybe they became more active in their synagogues or reached out to those who were sick in their town with a special kind of compassion. Perhaps they told the story of this man, this Jesus who had taken them out of darkness into light, but we really don't know any of these things for sure.

What we do know is that one leper comes back to thank Jesus. In doing so, he is blessed a second time. Because his disease has been healed, the man doesn't have to yell at Jesus from a distance, but rather gets to come close enough to prostrate himself at Jesus' feet. He is able to have a conversation with Jesus. He now believes in Jesus, in who Jesus is and in who sent him. The man now has faith and the understanding that this gift of God has made him well. By coming back to give thanks, the man is able to enter into a relationship with Jesus, a deep and satisfying love that changes his life forever. Luke doesn't tell us anything about the healed man after Jesus tells him to go on his way, but we can imagine the man rushing home to tell everyone he knows what has happened. This doesn't make the other nine lepers bad, but it makes all the difference in the world to the tenth. As Debie Thomas writes, "Ten lepers dutifully stand at a distance and call Jesus 'Master.' One draws close, dares intimacy, and finds his lasting home, clinging to Jesus for a better and more permanent citizenship.”

I hope you have come this insight long before I have: the healed leper who returns to Jesus does it not because he has to, but because he wants to, so great is his joy at what Jesus does for him. Giving thanks deepens his relationship with Jesus and it's as if the man is healed a second time. So, when we give thanks to Jesus for what he has done for us, we, too, receive a second gift: a deepening of our relationship with Jesus, an assurance of his constant presence and the promise of our eternal home with him. Giving God thanks doesn't enrich God, it gives us the riches of God's blessings. As the thirteenth century mystic Meister Ekhart tells us, “If in your lifetime the only prayer you offer is Thanks, that would suffice.”

And when we offer our Thanks to God, that deepening of relationship spills over into our relationships with one another. It helps us appreciate more those who love us, to be grateful when people share God's holy love with us. We realize we don't have to live in isolation, hiding out because of what we think of as own forms of crippling leprosy. Giving Thanks to God opens us up to Christ's healing power and draws us closer to this body, these friends in Christ who are our precious gift from God. Offering God our Thanks gives us a new kind of vision, one that sees not only our own needs but the needs of those around us, especially those who feel cut off from the world and separated from God.

God has given us so much. God has given us our very lives and rescues us from the enemies that attack our bodies and souls. When the reality of that starts to sink in, when our hearts turn toward God in thanksgiving, that's when we get the second gift: a closer relationship with our loving God and with our neighbor. Though we really shouldn't need a second or third look at this amazing grace, God waits patiently for us until we see it from just the right angle, then pulls us closer so we can celebrate together.

Amen.

*Pentecost 21*

*October 9, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Church*

*Luke 17: 11-19*