

Message at Friends of Woodstock School Interfaith Sunday Service,

October 29, 2023

Intro: My name is Joel Bjerkestrand, and I'm from the class of '65. I attended Woodstock from 1953-58. My parents, Ole and Hazel Bjerkestrand were missionaries with the Santal Mission in Assam and Bihar for 33 years. My two older brothers, Al (class of '45), and David (class of '50) both graduated from Woodstock, My brother David was a bachelor for 65 years and met up with Lois Hostetler (class of '50) after she had been widowed for 9 years and they were married for 20 years. I'm semi retired and on staff as visitation pastor at La Casa de Cristo Lutheran Church in Scottsdale.

The scripture text I've chosen to preach on is Luke 17:11-19, and I chose it because it references people with the dread disease of leprosy. Most people in the U.S. have no clue about leprosy, and we who have lived in India have seen it. My parents' mission had two leprosy colonies to help people with the disease.

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

"The former leper knelt at Jesus' feet and thanked him...Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

'Thank you' is all he said. And Jesus replied, *"Your faith has made you well."*

I don't get it. There has been no mention of faith up to this point in the story. Not, at least, in the way I was taught the word "faith" means. I was taught that faith means 'belief.' I mean, when we have the confession of faith in some of our traditional liturgies on Sunday mornings, we say, "I believe."

Or I was taught to think about faith as 'trust.' If you put your faith in something you trust in it. But there is no mention of belief or trust in this former leper coming back to Jesus. He simply comes back to say, "Thank you."

As I read this passage over and over again, something hit me...kind of like a 2x4 right between the eyes.

What if faith isn't belief or trust; what if faith is simply saying, "Thank you?" And by that I don't mean just saying it, but living it. What if faith is simply living a life of thanksgiving?

Now my first reaction to this is, "C'mon Jesus, that's too easy." Of course until I started to think about it.

Because to live a life of thanksgiving means I have to acknowledge a 'giver'... a 'gifter.' To live a life of thanksgiving means to acknowledge that I am not the beginning and end of existence.. To live a life of thanksgiving means to acknowledge that the idea that I have possessions is an illusion, To be thankful for everything means that everything is a gift.

And so I began to run with this idea. Could it be that faith means saying, "Thank you."

Would it fit to substitute 'thank you' in Bible passages that say the word 'faith'? Like..."**Thank you** comes from what is heard." Yeah, that works. "The just shall live by **thankfulness**." That fits as well. "Your '**thank you**' has made you well." Hmm, come to think of it, my selfishness or ingratitude have never made me well. And life does seem a lot healthier when I recognize all that I have been given.

Let's try some more, shall we?

*"Now '**thankfulness**' is the assurance of all things hoped for."* Let that one sing in.

*"For by grace you have been saved through **thanksgiving**. And this is not of your own doing, it is a gift of God, not a result of works."*

Now that fits perfectly. Because thankfulness is not a work. It is only the result of a gift. The only reason you and I say "Thank you" is because we have been given something...or had something done for us.

If I would stand up and say, "Look at me, I'm thankful," it would seem odd. You might ask, "Thankful for what?" And if I replied, "It doesn't matter, what matters is I decided to be thankful!"

Uhhh, no I don't think so.

And think about what a difference it would make in our Christian confession of faith, when instead of saying, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth..."

What if we said: *"Thank you, God the Father. Thank you for creating heaven and earth."* *"Thank you Jesus Christ..."* *"Thank you Holy Spirit..."*

Now that's more than a confession of belief. That's a confession of dependence, of gratitude.

The whole focus shifts away from me and what I believe, and onto the giver-the gifter-of all.

Which is what the one former leper did. He wasn't focused on his own purity, but the one who had declared him pure.

That is not much different from a passage in the Gospel of Luke 15:17, where the disciples ask Jesus to "Increase our faith." And Jesus replies, **"Don't make your faith the object of your faith."** "No thank you!" Jesus responds, "I have greater plans for you, you will be my presence in the world."

In this one healed leper, a foreigner for that matter, we see someone who hasn't made his own purity the object of his faith.

I wish I could say the same about myself. How often I have made my own purity, my own righteousness, my own holiness the object of my faith...rather than the one who has declared me pure, declared me righteous, declared me holy?

How much time have I spent reading the Bible and leading Bible studies with the goal of increasing my or others' understanding rather than bringing myself or them to a greater sense of thankfulness?

Because if your belief system doesn't make you thankful, what good is it? Jesus, it seems, is more interested in us being thankful than believing rightly. Is that why it was a Samaritan who came back? The one with the 'wrong' belief system?!

Arguing about doctrine and theology and belief systems seems absurd in the face of faith being understood as being 'thankful.'

I think the next time I meet a Christian who seems to have all the right answers, who wants to argue theology, I think I will just ask, "And how does all of this make you thankful?" Because if your belief system doesn't make you thankful, what good is it?

I think when faith becomes thanksgiving, the whole focus gets changed. It's a Copernican revolution because I am no longer the center.

When I say, "I believe," or "I accept," the focus is on me.

When I say, "Thank you," the focus is on the other...our God...the giver and gifter of all.

And think what this means for inter-faith conversation. The question isn't, "Tell me what you believe?" But, "Tell me how you say 'Thank you.'"

How do you say 'thank you' to God?

I say 'thank you' through Christian stories, ritual, and worship. I'm a part of the Christian "Thank you."

Tell me about your "Thank you" tradition.

After all, is there only one right way to say, "Thank you?" Is there only one right way to live a life of "Thankfulness?"

Are there only certain situations in which one should say, "Thank you?"

Like, only when life is going well?

What about those in recovery who are thankful for what their addiction has taught them? What about those who have been through serious illness who are thankful for the life they now live? What about those like the woman who said, "I don't need to be healed from my MS, because my MS has healed me."

When you read the story of Jesus' followers in the book of Acts, that is pretty much all they are doing...living a life of thanksgiving...sharing all and everything they have.

Why, the Apostle Paul even gives thanks for his imprisonment.

Call me crazy...77 years of struggling in ministry with what it means to have faith? How to increase my faith? How to share my faith? You know, what does it all mean?!

And Jesus simply responds, "Why don't you start and end by saying , Thank you?"

It all seems too easy, which is probably what makes it so hard.

Because to live a life of thanksgiving means I have to acknowledge a 'giver'... a 'gifter.' To live a life of thanksgiving means to acknowledge that I am not the beginning and end of existence. To live a life of thanksgiving is to acknowledge that the idea I have possessions is an illusion.

To be thankful for everything means that everything is a gift. And if it is even possible to increase my faith, my thankfulness, then the only way to do so is increase my awareness of the giver and giftedness of life...to look outside myself...for there is no place for navel-gazing faith when faith is seen as thankfulness.

We say "Thank you" to God. And God replies back, *"You're welcome. Now go on, get out of here. Your 'thankfulness' is your healing, your 'thankfulness' will make you whole."*

Amen.

(Then I sang a "prayer song of thanks" titled, "We Thank You, Father")