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Luke 17:11-19  
Six-Word Memoir

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*On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."*

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We have specific these days in our lives, which are truly life changing. Time is marked before and after those days. Before and after we had a car accident. Before and after we had a book published. Before and after we had a child. Before and after we were diagnosed. Before and after...for many it is not just one event in our lives that hold such significance but there are only a handful at most that make the cut for truly life changing events.

For the ten men with leprosy, I am sure one of those days was the day they first saw a wound on their skin. This highly contagious, life threatening disease required immediate isolation – lepers were quarantined, permanently. Children ripped from parents, a father or a mother sent away, the elderly gone, never to be seen again. In the days of Jesus, there was a strict system of which type of people were better than others – there were the obvious distinctions between Jew and Samaritan, slave or free, men or women, these distinctions mattered a great deal. They mattered a great deal until someone caught leprosy. Then no one cared what you were other than a leper.

Before and after we saw the wounds on our flesh – the leper's life was never the same. Jesus was passing through a village when ten men with this skin disease and they called out to him for mercy. Have mercy on us! Jesus told them to go and see the priests. This was an important proclamation, and they would know what this could mean. The only way for a leper to be restored to the community was to visit a priest and be examined and have their health verified. They would then have a ritual purification and then be allowed to rejoin the community. 'Go and see the priest,' was a hugely encouraging statement to receive from the man some were saying had the power to heal. And when they went, the priest verified that they were no longer unclean, they were no longer a health risk, they were no longer cast out into the darkness. Jesus had healed them; the priests had verified it. Their ban from society was removed. Their lives could begin again. Meeting Jesus, being healed by Jesus was the second seminal event for these ten men.

COVID has given us a new appreciation for the plight of the leper. Remember in the early days, if someone coughed or sneezed near you it would cause you to shudder, hide your face, and move away quickly. We learned lepers' words like social distance and isolation and quarantine. We learned what it meant to be cut off from people, from communities, from events, and from

places because we were ‘unclean’ or what we called ‘positive’ or ‘showing symptoms.’ For most of us with COVID, we knew this was a temporary condition but for some it was life threatening. The condition of the leper was one that was incredibly uncertain – recovery from leprosy was unlikely and a life of isolation and a slow death was usually the outcome. The ten men calling out for mercy to Jesus were probably not really expecting to have a life changing day. But Jesus freed them. They were sick – then Jesus arrived, and life was never the same. It was one of those bid days.

And yet only one of them had the thought to return to Jesus to say thank you. It is strange that they were not all overflowing with gratitude and desperate to show their appreciation. Emily Post would be sad to learn that this is not just a story about having good manners. It is a story about understanding the bigger picture and being spiritual awakened and being able to recognize the presence of the divine. Because nine men saw it has a milestone day where they got their health restored. But the one man, also given his health, realized this was a life changing day because he had just met the Savior of the world. He had been healed but more importantly he had been saved. That one man praised God and thanked Jesus. He recognized Jesus as healer and as Son of God. This wasn’t just about health today; it was about finding wholeness in this life and the next. Ten men were healed that day. One man was converted to faith.

Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a six-word story. Supposedly, he came up with: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” Haunting six words. In 2006, Larry Smith, a magazine journalist, challenged his readers to write a six-word memoir. Smith wanted to challenge people to be articulate and expressive. “It does two things,” Smith said. “It sparks a conversation: ‘Who are you? What is your life like?’ And it also offers an essence: We have big lives that change every day. To sum it up in six words, it forces you to get down to the essence.”

Two days after issuing the challenge, Smith had over 10,000 submissions. The six-word challenge has now turned into a book series and is used in various settings and as a tool for groups and in therapy, teaching, and corporate settings. Erin Centa was an English teacher who heard about the assignment when she was pregnant. She assigned it to her seniors as they reflected on the transition point in their lives. A few years earlier Erin and her husband Michael had suffered the loss of their son Brandon who was stillborn. She was dealing with conflicting emotions, a sense of continued loss and then a gratefulness for being pregnant again. She took on the assignment, so she had one to share with her students and help them get started on their own reflection.

Erin’s six-word memoir was, *Counting the blessings, remembering the pain*. She said when she wrote it down it felt like relief. I felt like I learned something about myself. It is an exercise in going deeper and being reflective and trying to find meaning...in just six words.

I think those nine lepers would have a six-word memoir like, “I was sick, now I’m back.” But the one, the one who went back to thank Jesus, his memoir would be, “Health restored, faith found, praise be.” The essence of his life wasn’t just about himself, it was about God’s gift of mercy.

There is something very significant about the man’s return to Jesus. It meant that he was going to live his life not just for himself. It meant that he was going to give credit where credit was

due. It meant he could see God's call upon his life. When we have these life changing events, we need to take stock of God's role, God's presence, and God's call. If God is the author and creator of our lives then we should assume God is part, in one way or another, of our life changing events.

On this holiday weekend, I think about Harriet Tubman. She was called the "Moses of her people". She was a slave who escaped to the north. Instead of carrying on her way as a freed woman, she went back. She went back to help others as a "conductor" of the Underground railroad. She helped men and women escape from slavery into freedom. It is this kind of attitude that isn't just about having good manners to return and say thank you. It is that in being freed her life was changed, as she found her calling to help liberate others. Harriet went back. Her six-word memoir could have been, "I am free, come with me."

There is more to life than taking care of ourselves, celebrating our own freedom, our own health, our own prosperity. We are called to go back. To go back to the source, to say thank you, to help others, to live lives of meaning. We aren't called to be one of the nine, who are healed and keep going. We are called to be the one who is healed, freed, forgiven, blessed and then who goes back. There are many people who are still living lives of shame, isolation, fear, oppression, and need. There are many people who live in physical or mental or emotional leper colonies, isolated from lives of wholeness. There are many who need mercy. When we think about our lives, breaking them down to their essence, there should be component of gratitude to God and service to others.

I bet the guy who went back to say thank you lived an incredible life thereafter. I bet he helped bring healing to others. I bet he told his story about Jesus and brought others hope. I bet he became an incredible disciple.

I hope when we look back on our lives, when we boil them down to their essence, there will be elements of faith in God, gratitude for our blessings, and a real commitment to love our neighbors. Our lives of faith tell important stories about what and who we loved.

Larry Smith leaves us with a six-word motto: Everybody has a story. What's yours?

Amen.

