

Leper No. 10

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, November 23, 2008 Luke 17:11-19

They call it “Tinseltown,” a reflection of the fact that so much there is glittery but unsubstantial. People go there to gawk and the rich and famous, especially movie stars. Paparazzi and tabloid reporters camp out there (and in nearby Beverly Hills), hoping to catch the stars in an unguarded moment – or better – to catch them behaving badly. It is where many modern myths are made, and a lot of mediocre movies. It is Hollywood. Now, when Hollywood gets mentioned in sermons, it usually comes in for a good deal of criticism and perhaps some blame for its negative influence on our culture. But today I may surprise you a bit and say a few good things about the place, and about one of its stars. Hollywood is not where we normally look for spiritual instruction, but now and then perhaps we should.

The star I have in mind is the master comic Jim Carrey, a fast-talking slapstick artist of the highest rank. He is certainly not above sight-gags, pratfalls and potty humor. But if you look at his whole body of work, you will see that he has also taken roles that one might fairly describe as profound, even philosophical. From “Liar, Liar,” a movie about a fast talking lawyer who suddenly becomes unable to lie, to “The Truman Show” where he plays a man who discovers his whole life is simply a carefully scripted television show, to “The Majestic,” in which Carrey’s character is mistakenly embraced by a small town who thinks he is a long lost son back from the war, these movies ask us to think deeply. What is truth? How much freedom are we willing to trade for a comfortable and familiar life? To what extent should we allow ourselves to become who others need us to be?

In still another film, “Bruce Almighty,” Carrey ventures from the broadly philosophical into genuine – and genuinely Christian – theology. Carrey plays an ambitious TV reporter who is temporarily given God’s powers. The film is full of laughs, but it also provides a serious message. Carrey himself describes that message. He says it is all about “not seeing your blessings,” something that is “a common problem for a lot of people.”

It is a message Carrey takes to heart. From time to time, he himself makes lists of things he is grateful for. He says, “I would challenge anybody in their darkest moment to write what they’re grateful for, even stupid little things like the green grass that made them feel good, the friendly conversation they had with somebody on an elevator. You start to realize how rich you are.”

Count your blessings. Acknowledge the good in your life. Give thanks for what you have been given. It is good advice, but you don’t have to listen to a movie star to learn it. If you prefer, you can simply open up Luke’s gospel and learn it from a leper – Leper No. 10. Jesus is in the midst of his healing and teaching ministry in Luke’s gospel when he is met by a group of lepers. I say “met,” but that is not quite accurate. They call out to him from a distance, as was expected of them. In biblical times, leprosy referred to a number of contagious skin diseases, only a small fraction of which may have been modern leprosy or Hansen’s Disease, a bacterial infection that affects nerves and skin, leading to the loss of sensitivity to pain and sometimes self-injury. At any rate, people with these various skin diseases in biblical times were recognized as a threat to the well being of others and ordered to keep their distance. The Old Testament law, in Leviticus 13, makes it clear: “The person who has the leperous 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.”

So it comes as no surprise that the ten lepers in our story approach Jesus as he enters a village. They are in quarantine outside the village, and call to Jesus as he enters, hoping he will turn to help them before he goes where they are not allowed. “Have mercy on us!” they begged. What they hoped for, most likely, was alms – charity. This is how they survived, as beggars. But Jesus gave them something better. “Go and show yourselves

to the priests,” Jesus says. We may not know what that means, but they did, because they immediately departed to do what Jesus asked them to do. You see, under the same law that ordered them to live “outside the camp,” they were instructed to go to the priests for confirmation if they should ever believe they were healed. So Jesus had in essence said, “You are (or will be) healed. Go and get your certification from the priests.”

So off they went, and as they went, they were healed. And surely much rejoicing followed. But of the ten, only one stopped, turned around and gave thanks to the One who had provided the healing. 10%, that’s all. One. Now, to be fair, we must admit that the other 9 were doing as they were told. They were being obedient. They were doing what was asked and expected of them. But that is all. Leper No. 10 did more. He provided an example not just of obedient living, but of abundant living – life that rises above the ordinary.

That is the effect gratitude can have on your life – to take it from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the merely obedient to the abundant. In fact, research has shown that people who make the effort to acknowledge their blessings do better in any number of ways. Mental health improves. Even physical health gets better. A study of healthy college students and incurably ill senior citizens showed the same results – those in either group who focused on the good in their lives and gave thanks felt better, were more optimistic, exercised more and were even nicer to neighbors and more willing to help other people with problems. It is clear that being thankful is actually good for you!

But I can imagine some of you saying, “Wait a minute. How am I supposed to just start being thankful? Gratitude is something you either feel, or don’t feel, isn’t it?”

My answer is yes and no. As far as feelings of gratitude go – much like all other feelings – they do tend to come and go, and we can’t always do much about it. But gratitude is not just a feeling. In fact, what was studied in the research was not feelings, but practices. The focus was on people who set apart time every day to think about and name the blessings in their lives, whether they felt grateful at the moment or not. Yes, these people also reported feeling more thankful, but why do we assume the feelings caused the action – that the feelings of gratitude caused them to count their blessings? Apparently, it works just as well – and maybe better – the other way around – counting your blessings creates an attitude of gratitude. Feelings can result from behavior, not just cause behavior.

Try it and see. Put a piece of paper and a pencil on the night stand next to your bed. Every night, before you go to sleep, just take a minute or two to jot down three “blessings” you experienced that day, large or small, and think a moment about each one. Do it for a month, and see if your attitude and outlook hasn’t improved. It will. I’m guessing all 10 lepers felt thankful. But only Leper No. 10 took the initiative to come back and express his gratitude. That is the thing Jesus celebrates, that this one – this outsider, a Samaritan after all – this one out of ten understood that gratitude is something we practice, not just something we feel (or don’t).

This week, nearly all of us will celebrate the holiday we call Thanksgiving with family, friends or others. We will eat all sorts of good things that we, oddly enough, don’t often eat the rest of the year. We will catch up on one another’s news, maybe watch some television together. And we may or may not feel thankful.

But that’s o.k. That’s not the point, and besides, it is a rotten life to go around trying to make yourself feel things you don’t feel, or stop feeling things you do. God never asks us to do that. What God asks is that we count our blessings anyway. God asks that we “go through the motions” of gratitude, that we acknowledge what we have received, regardless of how we feel in the moment.

Because God knows how we are made – God made us! And God knows that sometimes “going through the motions” is good medicine, that counting blessings counts even when you don’t feel happy – maybe especially when you don’t feel happy. God knows that thanksgiving is itself a kind of gift – that in giving thanks for blessings we have, we are blessed again. Amen.