

A matter of breeding

Luke17:11-19

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I'm so old I remember that my mother would make us dress up to go 'downtown' to do our annual dress or Christmas shopping.

She spent a lot of time drilling into us that good manners were a feature of good breeding and as our behaviour was a direct indication of her genetic suitability – we were in no doubt that we'd better get it right.

Last week, we talked about the importance of written correspondence and how blessed we are to be able to read Paul's letters so many years later; to know what was on his mind; to learn a little about the issues facing the early church. Well, I'm willing to bet no one has saved the tortuous thank-you notes we forced to write as children.

Thank-you notes were drilled into us. So much so, that last year, I sent a thank you note to a woman who faithfully hosted the combined ministers' breakfasts for years... and she responded with the most touching thank-you-note for a thank-you note that I have ever received.

Alas, like all correspondence, thank-you notes have almost died out. I'm not sure Geoff and I completed them all after our wedding as life kind of took over. My son and his wife – did hardly at all. Of course, the older relatives complained saying they had no way of knowing whether they got their gifts...but they knew. They just wanted the thank-you note...confirmation of their generosity. Which reminds me of Paul's letter to the Galatians where he asked ...'are you so foolish, after beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?' (Gal 3:3)¹

My grand-children have never sent a note but they usually call to say thank you – because their mother makes them.

Perhaps it is human nature that we need our generosity confirmed. What is an act of the spirit soon becomes a need for validation. Oh, how broken we are.

The first thing that strikes me about story of the ten lepers is how casual Jesus is. As he was going into a village, he saw 10 lepers. No surprise there. They congregated at the gates and outskirts to beg passers-by and keep their distance from the hustle

¹ ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?^[a] ⁴ Have you experienced^[b] so much in vain—if it really was in vain? ⁵ So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? ⁶

and bustle of the town centre. They courteously kept their distance from Jesus and asked for Him to have pity. When he saw them, he had mercy on them....

When I see a piece of rubbish on the ground, I pick it up. It was that casual! Look up, see leper, send him to the priest. Look down, see McDonalds bag, pick it up. No big thing – just the right thing to do...only the McDonalds grace is a lot less grand.

What's astounding is how understated the whole thing is...so clearly this is not the point we are supposed to be chewing on.

Now just as aside, and not to downplay this story, we have to keep in mind that "Leper" was a word to describe anyone with a skin disease. It did not mean they all had leprosy, now referred to as Hansen's disease. They could have acne, carbuncles, eczema, impetigo or psoriasis. Anything that was ugly and on the skin was referred to as leprosy and unclean because clearly touching someone with a skin disease or having them prepare your food was not a good idea.

The priests were the bio-security masters. Once declared clean, there would be a ritual, some offerings and people would return to their normal lives...which, presumably, is what they did.

But one returned and became a model of faith. That's a 10% return on investment. Pretty small considering the size of the investment...even if it was seen as 'casual'. And this harps back to the readings immediately before this story. Jesus is trying to impress on the disciples just how much they have to be prepared to forgive those who don't hear the word, who don't fall into place – and yet continue to live their mission in hope and faith. In other words, don't be discouraged by your success rate, You just need to have enough faith. The disciple's response was, of course, to ask Jesus 'to give us more faith' and Jesus tells the story of the mustard seed.

The message in *that* story was: Not only is a kernel of faith enough – AND it exists in all of us...but as those of us who are failed gardeners know, not every seed germinates. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't plant.

So the centre of this story is that **one** returned...and that is enough.

And there is a 2nd, more subtle message to the disciples – don't expect the credit. You may never know, or meet again, those your have 'saved'.

Only one came back and fell at the feet of Jesus. We don't even know if he went onto the priest or not. And we don't know what lives the others led.

But of course, that's not the kicker. Remember, I said every story has a twist.

Racism is hereditary and it's infectious². Every nation in the world has its equivalent of Tasmanian jokes. Noufie jokes in Canada. It was Polish jokes when I was young in the USA which were later replaced with Mexican jokes. Irish jokes in the UK and no one trusts the Romani.

You get my drift. The point is, WE are better, brighter, more successful than **them**. Well, here we go. Who had the good manners to return and say thank you? We start with a yucky, unclean, marginalised leper and we celebrate a mixed-breed, least-likely-of-lepers, opposite-of-good-breeding human who not only comes back to say 'thank you' but shows unrestrained, spontaneous and exuberant appreciation.

Nine did not publicly celebrate the joy in praising the divine – they went through the ritual.³ But one became almost a model of the joy in submission to a loving God.

“The Samaritan dramatizes the essence of faith and disrupts an otherwise easy assumption that we know who the real insiders are.”⁴

So much for good breeding. The Spirit has other ideas. When we remember who made us – *then* we can talk about breeding.

Such a little story and yet so much to say. Every opportunity is a seed of faith that might, just might, spring into full blown glory. No one should hang around and wait for a thank you and never assume you know who has potential and who does not.

Amen

² More infectious than leprosy

³ Again in Gal 3:5 ⁵ So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

⁴ P.555, Corsar, Gaventa et al, *Texts for preaching*, Year C, Westminster John Knox Press