

THE TEN-PERCENT SOLUTION
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
OCTOBER 21, 2007—STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY
THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—LUKE 17:11-9
WILLIAM A. EVERTSBERG

The biblical word for leprosy covers a whole range of skin ailments from the serious Hansen's disease, which deadens the nerves in human extremities to the point where you can't tell if the pebble in your shoe is slicing open your heel or the pan you are holding is scalding your fingers, to milder disfigurements like eczema, psoriasis, and even a bad case of teenage acne, anything which speckled or mottled the skin.

Modern medicine has discovered that Hansen's disease is actually not all that contagious, and as a matter of fact acne is rather hard to catch too, but earlier human societies didn't know that, so in most of them a diagnosis of leprosy was equivalent to a sentence of incarceration.

Once or twice before I've mentioned the leper colony maintained by the U.S. Government on the Hawaiian island of Molokai for a hundred years ending only in 1969. In 1957 Mele Meheula had been there for 69 years. When it was clear that her days were numbered, the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* ran a series of stories about her life in the hope that the publicity would uncover any remaining relatives. Reporters knocked on doors and the paper published a phone number to call, but no one came forward. The newspaper reported, "Miss Meheula has never heard a word from her family from the day she was taken from them." She'd been there since she was nine years old. The only people at her funeral were other patients.¹

The Hawaiians had a picturesque name for leprosy: they called it "the sickness that is a crime."²

¹John Tayman, *The Colony* (New York: Scribner, 2006), pp. 276-77.

²Tayman, p. 8.

It stands to reason then that if somebody—a doctor, perhaps, or the Son of God—erases the disease from your life and gives you a complexion as flawless as Halle Berry's, a thank-you note at least might be in order.

One day while Jesus is on his way from Nazareth, the city of his origin, to Jerusalem, the city of his destiny, he encounters ten pathetic folk afflicted with the disease that is also a crime. "From a distance," Luke tells us in the saddest words of this otherwise happy tale. "From a distance," as the law stipulated—keep your distance, leper, lest you leperize the rest of us. "From a distance," they collectively choir their supplication, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Jesus responds, "Go show yourselves to the priest." That's all he has to say and they race off to the closest cleric faster than Marion Jones on steroids.

One of them, however, glances down in the middle of his dash, notices that his formerly disfigured hands and feet are as pure as a Dove Dish Soap hand-model, slams down so hard on the brakes of his sprint he almost pulls his hamstring, turns around, races back the other way, catches up with Jesus, falls at his feet, and lets loose with a hale and hearty hallelujah. Jesus is a little surprised, perhaps because at least *one* of them cared enough to say 'thanks,' or perhaps because *nine* didn't. "Where are the nine?" he plaintively asks.

Where are the nine? A couple of things to notice about this story. Luke is the only one of the four Gospels to tell us this story, and I feel like a broken CD player with a stuck laser beam telling you this all the time, but Luke loves the least, the last, the lost, the losers, and the lepers. As we'll see in a moment, Luke, the only Gospel writer to tell us the

story of the Good Samaritan, also loves Samaritans.

Odd story for Stewardship Sunday, don't you think? Maybe not. A couple of things to notice. First of all, we might notice from this story that unspoken gratitude doesn't really exist. Here's the thing about this story: it doesn't tell us that the other nine who kept racing off to see the priest weren't grateful for winning the health lottery, just that they didn't bother to speak their gratitude or share it. Chances are they were just as happy and thankful as the lone returnee, but silently thankful, privately thankful.

We might learn from this story that private gratitude is bootless and in fact doesn't really exist. This is the theological version of the old conundrum "If a tree falls in the forest but no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" Webster's Dictionary answers 'No,' because it defines a sound as 'a thing that is heard.' No ear, no sound. A physicist will answer 'Yes' because physics defines a sound as a wave of energy traveling through a medium like air or water and some of those waves are of such low or high frequency that no ear can hear them, so a sound is still a sound, ear or no ear.

But a theologian agrees with Webster's and answers 'No' because for a theologian gratitude is like a sound; gratitude is a thing that is heard. "If someone is grateful but no ear ever hears about it, is it still gratitude?" If you love your wife but never bother to tell her, is it still love? Ask her; she'll tell you. If your parents ate peanut butter and jelly for eight years to send you to Brunswick and Middlebury, but you never phone home from your snappy condo in San Diego, are you really grateful? Gratitude is a thing you must *hear*. Gratitude is a thing you must *peak*. Gratitude is a thing you must *do*. Aye, now we're getting closer to stewardship.

You know who Branch Rickey is, don't you? Branch Rickey was the University-of-Michigan-trained lawyer and baseball executive who gave baseball its minor league farm system, pitching machines, batting helmets, the Fellowship of

Christian Athletes, Jackie Robinson, and Roberto Clemente. But Branch Rickey was famously penurious. St. Louis slugger Enos Slaughter said, "Mr. Rickey was always going to the vault to give you a nickel's change." Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda said that when he once signed a contract with Branch Rickey, Mr. Rickey told him to keep the details confidential. Mr. Lasorda said, "You don't have to worry about me, Mr. Rickey. I won't tell anybody. I'm just as ashamed of it as you are." Brooklyn outfielder Gene Hermansky said, Mr. Rickey had a heart of gold, and he kept it."³ If you have a heart of gold, don't keep it; give some of it away.

That's the first thing we learn from this story. Private gratitude doesn't exist; it is a thing that is heard, a thing that is spoken, a thing that is done. The second thing we learn is that this story has the percentage just about right, doesn't it? About ten-percent of us bother to thank the Giver of Every Good and Perfect Gift for life, love, laughter, health, and wealth. About ten-percent of us bother to notice that "life is gift and birth windfall,"⁴ and 'even to exist at all is the primal wonder.'⁵

The population of Greenwich is roughly 60,000. How many townfolk are in church this morning? I'm going to guess that it's somewhere between ten and fifteen percent, or six to ten thousand. You see, here's the thing: if you ask Americans "Are you a regular church attender?" 40% of them will answer 'Yes,' but if you ask them "Did you attend church last Sunday?" the figure drops considerably, and if you ask the churches themselves, the highest figure the vigilant ushers can scare up after counting every last bottom in the pew is 18% of the general population. Since this is Greenwich, which

³Kevin Sherrington, "Ahead of the Game: Branch Rickey Earns Stamp of Greatness Even Before He Integrated the Major Leagues," *The Dallas Morning News*, April, 15, 1997.

⁴John Claypool, in an unpublished lecture at First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, 8-28-94.

⁵John Carmody, *Cancer and Faith* (Mystic, CT.: 23rd Publications, 1994), p. 30.

is both New England and Metro New York, our figure is a little lower than that, likely just north of ten percent, maybe as high as fifteen percent. There aren't all that many of us keeping the rumor of God alive in the world. There are lots of reasons to go to church but one of the most important is that it is our opportunity every seventh day to acknowledge that life is gift and birth windfall and there is someone to thank and praise for the unmerited benediction.

The third thing to learn from this story is something of a surprise. It has to do with *who* comes back to *spea*k and *express* and *do* his gratitude. The one guy who came back, Luke tells us almost in passing, was a Samaritan. This little tidbit of information, of course, is calculated to disquiet a Jewish audience, because for Jews, Samaritans were *persona non grata*. Living just north of Jerusalem in the never-never land between Galilee and Judea, Samaritans married Gentiles, they were mongrels, they kept casual kosher habits, they had funny accents. They were *almost* kosher, *almost* the chosen people, *almost* got it right, but not quite. For Jews the Samaritans were a disenfranchised population, so it comes as a surprise then that the one guy who praises God with a loud voice is a Samaritan, one of the guys on the outside.

But of course this shouldn't surprise us, should it? It's always the people on the *edge* of life who are most grateful for whatever life brings them. It's the once impoverished who are quick to address the needs of the poor. It's the once broken who make haste to bind up another's wounds. It's the once lonely who reach out to befriend the friendless. If you've never been seriously sick, you've probably never ached for sound health; you just take it for granted.

New York Times reporter Julie Salamon noticed a remarkable thing when she was pregnant. She discovered who was most likely to offer her their seat on the subway. In order, it was women with children, women without children, old men, Hispanic men, African American men, and finally,

last, young white men. "The most privileged are the most insular," she says.⁶

During World War I, the penniless lepers of Molo-kai contributed \$250 through the Red Cross to the war effort in Europe. When a newspaper editorialized that people with so little shouldn't be allowed to make such a sacrifice, the lepers responded by buying \$4000 worth of war bonds.⁷

A survivor of the World Trade Center bombings said, "Each day that I stay as a guest on this green Earth suddenly seems like outrageous good fortune."⁸ When you race down forty flights of steps in a cloud of smoke and dust and ash and sprint up West Broadway before the towers and three thousand people come crashing down, you eventually stop running, turn around, realize with every breath that you are a guest on this green earth, and fall at Jesus' feet.

But what does that mean for us, the extravagantly blessed, the recipients of unmerited prodigality, who are, after all, in danger of suffering the insularity of the privileged? Where are the nine? Our distance from need can blind us to its pressing urgency. Our very security can hamstring our capacity for gratitude.

I guess you can see where I'm going with this: your stewardship of your time, talent, and treasure is a thick, dense, solid, vivid, dramatic, colorful expression of your gratitude for undeserved benediction. It's a way of returning to Jesus healed and hale and whole and letting loose with a loud hallelujah at his feet.

The famous American lawyer Clarence Darrow once solved a woman's legal difficulties, and when she asked, "How can I ever thank you?" he re-

⁶Julie Salamon, *Rambam's Ladder: A Meditation on Generosity and Why It Is Necessary To Give*, (New York: workman Publishing,2003),p. 136.

⁷Tayman, p. 213.

⁸Quoted by Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks!* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), P. 171.

sponded, “Madam, ever since the Phoenicians invented money, there has been only one answer to that question.”⁹

There actually is more than one answer to the question “How can I ever thank you?” The blessed can be a blessing with daily, neighborly kindnesses. The grateful can attend worship every seventh day to choir the proper praise. The thankful can breathe a silent prayer of awe-struck gratitude to God for the carpet of scarlet and gold that blankets the path of our wanderings around here just now. But ever since the Phoenicians invented money, there has been *at least* one answer to the question “How can I ever thank you?”

The ten-percent solution to the prevailing ingratitude and entitlement of this contemporary world? The ten percent of us who bother to express our gratitude at all bother to express it by giving ten percent away. I’m sorry to be the bearer of challenging news, but the biblical mandate of a tithe has not shrunk these last three thousand years. For some of us, ten percent should be the distant goal, the finish line, and for others of us, ten percent should be the starting block, but ten percent it is and ever shall be.

You don’t have to give it all to the church. Education is a good thing; your *alma mater* deserves your support. Beauty is a good thing; the Metropolitan Opera and the Greenwich Symphony deserve your support. Safe and happy childhood is a good thing; Kids in Crisis deserves your support. Public Television is a good thing; Ken Burns deserves your support. God is a good thing; the church deserves your support. Can you give three percent to the church. I figure that if this congregation gave three percent of its income to the church, our budget would be close to \$3 million. That would do it.

So, what’s your story of sound health and unmerited benediction? For what must you choir the proper praise?

⁹Quoted in *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (Boston: Little Brown, 1985), 157.

I am thankful for those I love and who, improbably, love me back, as hard as it is, old friends and new.

I am thankful for the eccentric dreams of children and their wild play and loud laughter.

I am thankful for the resurgent Wolverines, and for the other college superpowers like USC and LSU who humbled themselves in impossible defeats so that Michigan wasn’t the only basket case this season.

I am thankful for this generous congregation who against towering odds built this new emblem of faithfulness on the Greenwich skyline. Every day I discover in a novel way how perfectly it fits our God-given mission; every day it fits more aptly like a fashionable new suit. I am thankful that even now, you won’t stop giving.

I am thankful for Joe Torre’s glorious twelve-year run and his honorable decision finally to say “When it comes to George Steinbrenner, enough is enough.”

I am thankful for Starbucks and Mondavi, who distill the essence of the good gifts of earth, in which you can taste the heat of the sun and the loam of the soil.

I am thankful for the love of God whose gift of a Son promises us that there will always be a second chance, that none of our stupidities become finalities, that there shall always be love in this world and life beyond death.

So here is this story of Jesus healing ten lepers, an improbable scripture lesson for Stewardship Sunday. One returns to let loose with loud hallelujahs at his feet. Where are the nine? Where are the nine? Oh yes, there you are.