Kevin Powell
Thanksgiving Sunday Luke 17:11–19

At Thanksgiving, someone usually suggests going around the table and naming something we are grateful for.

Some people love this.

Others suddenly discover that the potatoes need attention.

We know the expected answers. Family. Friends. Health. Food. And these are good answers. Obvious answers. They are also complicated answers.

Because someone at that table may be grieving a family member. Someone may be waiting for test results. Someone may be wondering how much longer they can afford the house where everyone has gathered.

Gratitude does not make these things disappear.

Sometimes gratitude sits beside them, unsure what to say.

Today's gospel begins with people who know something about uncertainty.

Jesus is travelling between Samaria and Galilee. He enters a village, and ten people with leprosy approach him.

They keep their distance.

That detail stays with me.

Before we hear their request, before we witness their healing, we are told about the space between their bodies and everyone else.

Their illness has become a boundary.

Perhaps they remember the last time someone embraced them without hesitation. Perhaps they have stopped remembering because remembering hurts.

They can see the village. They cannot fully belong to it.

They can call out. They cannot come close.

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

It is a prayer without decoration.

They do not explain why they deserve help. They do not promise to become better people. They ask for mercy.

And Jesus sees them.

Luke tells us that before Jesus speaks.

He sees them.

There are people who spend years being looked at without being seen. Their diagnosis is noticed. Their poverty is noticed. Their difference is noticed.

But the person underneath all that noticing waits.

Jesus sees them, and tells them to show themselves to the priests.

And as they go, they are made clean.

As they go.

The healing happens somewhere along the road.

I wonder who notices first.

Someone looks at a hand. Someone touches a cheek. Someone stops walking.

Then the others stop.

Imagine the sudden possibility of going home.

A doorway you can enter. A child you can hold. Work you can do. A place at a table where nobody shifts their chair away from you.

We should be careful before we scold the nine who keep going.

Jesus told them to go. They are going.

And after everything they have endured, perhaps they are running towards someone they love.

The gospel does not tell us.

It tells us that one turns back.

He praises God with a loud voice, falls at Jesus' feet, and gives thanks.

And then Luke adds: he was a Samaritan.

The person whose gratitude brings him close is someone who might ordinarily have been kept at a distance for another reason.

His skin has been healed. The divisions of his world remain.

Yet here he is, at Jesus' feet.

The story began with distance. Now there is closeness.

Perhaps this is one thing thanksgiving can do. It can bring us back into relationship with the giver, and help us notice the relationships that have carried us.

Because none of us arrives at this table alone. Even when we eat alone.

Hands have kneaded the bread. People have gathered the harvest. Lives are woven through the ordinary things we call ours.

Someone taught us. Someone fed us. Someone stayed when staying was difficult.

Someone forgave us before we knew how to ask.

Thanksgiving gives us a moment to notice. And noticing can be uncomfortable.

When we acknowledge that our lives are gifts, we also acknowledge that we are dependent.

We need one another. We need people whose names we know, and people whose names we will never learn.

We need mercy.

That can be difficult for those of us who prefer to be useful. We would rather bring the casserole than admit we need someone to bring us one.

We know how to help. Receiving help leaves us feeling exposed.

Yet these ten people have nothing to offer Jesus except their need.

And that is enough for him to see them.

There is good news here for anyone who arrives this Thanksgiving feeling less than thankful.

You do not have to manufacture a cheerful heart before asking for mercy.

You can bring the grief. You can bring the resentment. You can bring the fear that has followed you into church and is sitting beside you right now.

“Have mercy on us” is already a prayer.

God can meet you there.

And if gratitude comes, it may come in something small.

A neighbour who remembers your name. A meal that tastes good again. A morning when getting out of bed feels possible.

A laugh that surprises you because you thought laughter had gone away.

These things do not explain suffering. They give us something to receive within it.

Jesus asks where the other nine are. I hear a longing in that question.

There was room for all ten to return. Room for all ten to discover that the one who healed them would also welcome them close.

There is room for us, too.

And perhaps our thanksgiving becomes a way of making room for someone else.

We cannot receive this story only as people who need healing. We also hear it as a community capable of keeping people at a distance.

Who can see our table but cannot find a place at it?

Who has learned to call from the edge because coming closer has never felt safe?

The stranger. The exhausted parent. The person whose life does not fit our expectations.

Gratitude asks us to notice them.

Then it asks something of our hands.

Pull up a chair. Learn a name. Share what you have. Let another person's need interrupt your plans.

The Samaritan returns, and Jesus says, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

He receives a future.

He can rise from the ground and step into a life where distance need not have the final word.

That is our invitation this Thanksgiving.

Receive the mercy that meets you.

Notice the people through whom it comes.

And make room at the table.

There is bread to share.

There are names to learn.

There is someone waiting to be seen.

Amen.