

So I wouldn't have thought that I have a contentious relationship with the words "thank you" or maybe it is with the concept of "thank you" or maybe the use of "thank you" as a throwaway line akin to "sorry". But I do. I think it all started when people stopped saying "you're welcome" and just added another "thank you" to my "thank you". Carol can tell you this is one of my pet peeves.

I became acutely aware of this when I went to Lowes recently with today's scripture running through my head. I went to pick up two buckets I had ordered online, a new staple gun and 8 six feet long dowels. Just for your information, no one at Lowes knows where the staple guns are - for which I don't blame them. But I do blame them for guessing, and thus sending customers around their mammoth store. After my 6th sales associate it began to feel like a cruel game. Once I had traversed the store at least 5 times, I decided the efficient thing would be to grab the dowels when I saw them for the 3rd time. Their awkwardness seemed only momentary, until I went to pick up my buckets and was handed a gallon of floor wax. Another piece of information, not only do they not know the difference between floor wax and buckets, they don't know where the buckets are either. By this time the dowels began to fight me - - and started slipping apart, rolling away, no doubt trying to get back to aisle 20 where they were safe. A shopping cart was no use, they slipped right through it. The cashier looked up the buckets and told me where they should be there and I told him they were not. So I asked him the whereabouts of staple guns and he continued the game.

By this time they were probably afraid of what my intentions were for this gun. After two more fruitless encounters, a customer overheard my request and said, "staple guns? They are in the next aisle about halfway down." Despite the lack of knowledge on the part of the staff, the customers at Lowes are very helpful. I will just add that when I went to use the staple gun, a piece was missing and I had to return in.

What connection does this have to do with today's scripture, you ask yourself. By the time I left Lowes, I had said Thank You 19 times. The tone of those 'thank yous' ranged from true gratitude and hope to the equivalent of "oh yeah, right". When I wanted to prostrate myself before the customer who had the correct information, she was gone from the aisle and like the 9 lepers I was too intent on getting out of there to hunt her down.

The life of a leper was akin to that of a stray dog. They could not approach anyone, no one except a fellow leper. They could not go to the market place and buy food; their best hope of nourishment would have been to hang around on the fringes and hope that an apple, or a roll, is dropped by a shopper. Failing that, they could wait until the market closed down for the day and go and gather the detritus left behind. When these 10 lepers approach Jesus from a respectable distance, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" it is just as likely they were hoping for food as for healing. Without any explanatory words, Jesus heals them, all 10 and instructs them to go show themselves to the priests who were the only ones with the authority to pronounce a leper healed, cured, clean; cleared to rejoin society.

They all rush off to get reinstated in society. But One, realizing the enormity of what has happened returns to thank Jesus. Luke takes great pleasure in highlighting the fact that the only well brought up one among the 10 was a Samaritan, a foreigner whose ethnicity was generally looked down upon. Like the Good Samaritan, today's Samaritan is contrasted with the others who have been healed and who were presumably were Jews. But who did not return to thank Jesus.

So, I began to think about those 9 healed lepers. Wondering if they were not grateful or if perhaps gratitude carried a less than positive meaning for them. Perhaps they were sick to

the teeth with saying thank you for crumbs and rotten food; for an undisturbed night's sleep near to the warmth of a communal oven - although it was much more likely that someone encountering lepers sleeping near the oven would have kicked them out with words of deep contempt. Maybe, they'd been given the runaround in other ways - life long friends, brothers - their own mothers. None of those who had once loved them, tenderly touched them, laughed with them - not one of them stepped across the line between clean and unclean to talk with them, to show they knew and remembered them. For these 9, the Thank You had been wrung from their hearts a long time ago.

It's hard for us to think of Jesus' healing as anything other than what we know it to be - the love of God extending beyond the margins, healing both body and soul. But what if we think about the 9 other lepers and the experiences they've had for which they were supposed to be grateful. Jesus' mercy gave these men social acceptability. He wiped their skin clean. By anyone who came across them, they would be accepted, included, welcomed. Jesus healed 10 lepers, but healing the hearts of those who judged and feared them was another thing.

How are these 9 to erase the years of banishment? How are they to trust this extraordinary thing, maybe even to trust Jesus. They've endured years where they had to stay in their own group with other lepers. The rest of the populace felt like they were being pretty kind to let them hang around. When one, for instance, was caught stealing a chicken, he would be berated for being ungrateful; reminded how in any other country this would be a death sentence.

The one leper who returned to Jesus wasn't there saying thank you. He was there praising God; when Jesus asks about the others, he doesn't say how come there are no other 'thank yous', he says why are there no others praising God.

This 10th leper was a Samaritan - an outcast by virtue of his home country. Jesus interacting with him was a sign of who Jesus was, of how different Jesus was from those who had cast out the lepers, of how different Jesus was from the Samaritan hating Jews. Number 10 would not expect to be welcomed into society, even with clear and smooth skin. "Thank you" could not begin to contain this Samaritan's experience of having stepped from the margins accompanied by Christ.

It will take the other 9 some time to go beyond 'thank you' to praising God. They will go back into their communities and try to take up where they left off. Will they be able to achieve reconciliation? Will some former friends pretend nothing's happened? Will they themselves pretend nothing happened, just happy to be back in the fold. Only they aren't part of the fold, they've experienced alienation and just as thank you to Jesus isn't enough. Welcome home from their family and friends won't be enough.

Thank you is a mixed bag - sometimes it flows forth and sometimes it is said without a thought and sometimes, it is forced out of someone to assuage the guilt of the 'giver'. Re-entry into a community that has shunned you, enslaved you, cheated you is not easy and fast work. It cannot be done by one party alone. It cannot be done with preconceived ideas of where it should end up and who is to blame. Reconciliation cannot occur while one side fiercely holds on to their notion of superiority.

I imagine that the 9 other lepers found re-integration into their communities wasn't the seamless reunion they had dreamed of for years. I expect that the initial joy with which they tore away from Jesus was replaced with a yearning to connect with him which eventually brought them to their knees in praise of God.

As much as this is a story about gratitude, as much as this is a story about praising God, it is also a story about those on the margins and how to do the healing work required for the restoration of community. Maybe I've spent too much time with these 9 other lepers, but I feel like a lot is going on off stage which we could learn from.

National Lepers Day is the last Sunday in January, the next one is January 26.