

Ordinary people (Luke 17:11-19)

There is nothing wrong with the nine. There is something extraordinary about the one.

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There was one family in my first parish that lived on the edge of town.

They were not really members of my parish. The parents never came to church. I knew their children, who were friends with the children in my church and occasionally came to Sunday School.

Their father was a trucker, on the road a good deal of the time. So I was shocked to see him at church one Sunday morning. All by himself. I had no idea what made him come.

Afterwards, as everyone was coming out of church and shaking hands, he explained: he had had a close call on the road that week, and he felt that the only appropriate place for him to be on Sunday was at church, giving thanks.

I am not sure if I ever saw him at church again, not even on Christmas or Easter. But that Sunday he was the one who turned back. Every other person was there because it was their habit. They came every Sunday, or nearly so.

I am not saying that their presence was perfunctory or less than genuine. But it was a regular obedience, like the nine lepers who do exactly what Jesus tells them to do. They go and show themselves to the priest. There is nothing wrong with that.

But there is something extraordinary about the one who turns back. He is not doing what he was told to do. He actually disobeys Jesus' instructions in order to give thanks.

On the face of it, the story of the ten lepers is not such a remarkable story. Jesus heals lepers (although one at a time) in other places in the Gospels. He interacts with Samaritans who defy expectations. And giving thanks? Well, it's a central lesson of popular culture. "Gratitude journals" are their own cottage industry.

So what is it about this story? What does it mean? Is it about giving thanks? Or is it more than that?

I look around at the congregation on Sunday. Everyone is there, in the place they are supposed to be. But one person is more than grateful. One person is amazed—simply to be alive, simply to be healed.