

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 23 (C) ~ 12 October 2025
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Psalm 111
Luke 17:11-19

Falling on Our Face

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

In the summer of 2018, my family took the trip of a lifetime. We were blessed to join parishioners from my husband's current church in Alexandria and his former congregation in New York for a two-week pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was the summer before our eldest son's senior year in high school, so we knew this might be a "now or never" opportunity: Once he started college, his breaks would be occupied with jobs and internships, and his two brothers would follow suit shortly thereafter. Little did we realize then what we know now – namely, that less than two years later the world would shut down due to disease and, three years after that, war would make travel to that part of the world impossible. In retrospect, we see what a truly graced time that was.

But – and this really is a "but," and not an "and" – you can imagine that our children were less-than-thrilled about the trip when we first shared the news. At 17, 15, and 12, they already each had a long list of "must dos" on their bucket lists. But two weeks on a tour bus traveling around Israel-Palestine?

Not so much.

They thought it would be boring...

I had been to the Holy Land once before, when I was in my twenties, with a group from my parish in Manhattan. Our guide, Mordechai, was an Israeli who helped us understand more deeply the Jewish religious and cultural context in which Jesus was born and lived His earthly life.

This time our leader, Iyad, was a Palestinian Christian. Needless to say, the experience was quite different.

One day, we were traveling from Jerusalem, in the south, up to Nazareth and then on to the region of the Galilee. Now, it is possible to get from Jerusalem to the Galilee *without* traveling through the West Bank, but Iyad wanted us to understand, firsthand, what it was like for Christians living in that region in the 21st century. So we wended our way up through Ramallah and Nablus, and then on to the Separation Barrier dividing Palestinian and Israeli territories.

There our driver, Omar, came to a stop at the check point and presented documents authorizing us to go through. That particular crossing, at Jenin, is closed to Palestinians, except for residents of East Jerusalem (like Iyad) who are allowed pass after an inspection.¹ We all held our breath as Omar opened the doors to the tour bus and two Israeli soldiers – young men not much older than my children, assault rifles slung across their chests – boarded and began walking the aisle. Randy and I were up front; our boys were at the very back of the bus with the only other two kids on the trip. The adults all sat silently still, but my (clueless) sons were laughing and talking with their friends, oblivious to the magnitude of the moment. I don't think I have ever felt so vulnerable or prayed so hard as I did then, willing my guys to just sit up straight and be quiet. (You can imagine the Mom dagger looks...)

And then, one of the soldiers came to a stop in front of Andrew, seated on the end. He looked my baby directly in the eyes, solemnly raised his hand...and gave him a fist-bump before opening the back door of the bus and jumping out.

That was it. We were given clearance to proceed, and – after a safe distance – erupted with applause and cheers and (in my case) not a few tears.

¹ https://www.btselem.org/freedom_of_movement/checkpoints_and_forbidden_roads

Let's just say that my boys weren't bored anymore...

You may know that Israelis today refer to the West Bank as “Judea and Samaria”² – which is *exactly* where Jesus is traveling in this morning's Gospel.³ Then, as now, it was a fraught region, hostile to foreigners. Luke tells us that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, and then, as now, it was possible to get from the north to the south *without* traveling through Samaria. Nevertheless, Jesus chooses to go that way. Not long before, a Samaritan village had refused to welcome Jesus and the disciples (Luke 9:51-56), yet here He is again, passing through on purpose.

Jesus has an agenda.

Does He know that He is going to meet up with a group of lepers in need of healing? That I can't say. What I *can* say is that clearly He knows that He's going to encounter people who regard Him as “other,” as outsider, as foreigner – about whom His own people feel the same way. Remember that there is little love lost between Jews and Samaritans. That seems to be the point of Jesus' itinerary.

But notice that, when the lepers approach Jesus, He does not stop and ask for their travel documents; they don't need to show their passports or even a “Real ID.” They are ill, and Jesus makes them well. Heal first, ask questions later.

(That, by the way, is a good Rule of Life.)

And, of course, what is most striking about this story is that out of the ten lepers who are made clean, just one turns back to praise God. The only one to say “thank you,” it turns out, is a Samaritan.

We know how Luke feels about Samaritans from the parable about the “good” one. It's not subtle. Of the whole group, the one who bothers to express his gratitude is the one who, by rights, should be most hostile to, or maybe afraid of, Jesus.

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/What-Does-the-Term-Judea-and-Samaria-Mean>

³ <https://en.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/articles-speeches/the-church-of-the-ten-lepers-in-the-town-of-burqin/>

So what's the message here?

As a leper *and* a Samaritan, the one who expresses gratitude is doubly-vulnerable: He is an outcast by virtue of his physical condition, *and* he is face-to-face with a group of Jews who – historically, culturally – have been brought up to hate him.

Is there a connection between vulnerability and gratitude? If not, *should* there be?

Just last week we heard Jesus say that we don't thank people for doing what they "ought to have done" (Luke 17:10). Cami opened up that scripture beautifully, reminding us that service to one another is a sign of "audacious love."

Why, then, is Jesus tweaked this week when the 90% don't thank Him? Isn't He doing what He, of *anybody*, ought to do? Is Jesus really that hung up on social niceties?

Jesus isn't worried about manners here. And no, He doesn't "need" to be thanked – as nice as it might be to hear sometimes. We have to be careful not to get stuck on etiquette, because that is decidedly *not* the point.

The point is that the Samaritan is the one-in-ten who recognizes his own vulnerability. He is the only leper to demonstrate any kind of *humility*. The translation we heard just now says that he "prostrate[s]" himself, but a closer reading of the Greek says that he "[falls] on his face at [Jesus'] feet."⁴

When was the last time that you "fell on your face" for anyone? Has it been a while, as it has for me? Why is that?

I think that we don't tend to fall on our face, we don't readily humble ourselves, because it's not a lot of fun to admit our vulnerability. We are accustomed to

⁴ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/interlinear-bible/nas/luke/passage/?q=luke%2017%3A11-19>

being invulnerable, impervious to weakness and need – or at least we like to think so. We project an image of having it all together: This is Bethesda, after all.

Yet, as we've seen this morning, Jesus holds up the one who falls on his face as an example to be emulated. The Samaritan's gratitude isn't for Jesus' sake; God doesn't need our thanks – or anything from us, for that matter. No, the Samaritan's gratitude is for *his* sake: Like all of us, he needs to understand that his own imperfection, the extent to which he is incomplete before the Holy One. He just has the courage to admit it, when so many others do not.

You may have noticed the theme of “thanksgiving” in today's readings. It's not at all subtle! There's a reason for that; we need to be reminded. The Psalm, for example, begins by praising God with these words:

I will give thanks to you, O God, with my whole heart...

The Hebrew word for “thanks” literally means approaching God “with outstretched hands...confessing our faults to [God] and praising [God]” for all that has been done for us.⁵ More than once from this pulpit I've encouraged us to pray with our palms up, opening ourselves physically and spiritually to God. And more than once I've been told that this prayer posture is far too exposing, making folks feel far too vulnerable.

That, my friends, is precisely the point.

We need to say “thank you” to God (or to anyone else, for that matter) for *our* sake. We need to understand our proper place in the world as beloved children of God – not God. Jesus calls us to express our gratitude first and foremost as a way of acknowledging our vulnerability, “falling on our face” in humility. We need to be thankful – whether the other person needs our thanks, or not. Now, one could argue that the phrase “thank you” gets thrown around a lot –

⁵ <https://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/GiveThanks/give-thanks.htm>

so much so that it risks losing some of its “punch.” Doesn’t it cheapen thanks if we express it too much? Maybe...but think of it this way: “Thank you” is nothing more than a shortened form of “**I** thank you.” It’s not just polite language: It’s a declaration that I, in all of my humanity, *see* and *need* you, in all of yours. Like the equally-vulnerable “I’m sorry,” “I thank you” is personal. It’s equalizing. It’s humbling. It’s connective tissue joining two individuals.

Try it sometime: Add the pronoun, “I,” to the front of your next “thank you” – to God or another person – and see how that changes things. If that feels about as awkward as praying with open hands (!), then you could say “I appreciate you.” It gets to the same idea. The point is to “fall on your face” in humility, so that Jesus might tell you to “Get up and go on your way.”

Beloveds, let’s you and I be part of the courageous ten percent.

Amen.