

Thank You: A Proof for God

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Luke 17:11-19

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Does God exist? OK, that's a really big question. Most of the time we try to answer that question logically and rationally. For example, we say: Everything that is has come from something preceding it. God is the first cause of all that is, therefore God exists. Or we say: All of life is moving forward in an increasingly complex, yet orderly fashion. Since this couldn't happen by chance, we believe God is the source of life's plan; therefore God exists. Sometimes we prove God exists based on our own personal experiences: On such-and-such day I was overwhelmed by the beauty of a sunset – or I felt my heart strangely warmed – or I was diagnosed with cancer, but after I prayed to God for healing, now I'm totally cured; therefore, God exists.

The problem with rational proofs for God is that God isn't a rational proposition. God is a faith proposition and that is something that doesn't fit into a tidy $A+B=C$ formula. In my opinion, the problem with rational and emotional proofs of God's existence is that they are too internal. They are efforts to describe the God in my own head, the God in my own heart, which too easily becomes the God created in my own image. These descriptions are important faith talk, but they're not proofs. If I want a real proof for God, I have to look outside myself. More precisely, I have to look at the space between myself and the person next to me, my sister or brother in Christ, whoever that may be.

All of us have the ability to look beyond ourselves, to see beyond our immediate situation and focus on someone else. We turn our gaze off ourselves for a moment and concentrate on someone else – loving our neighbor as ourselves; seeking what is just for others even as we hope to be treated justly ourselves. This ability to step outside ourselves and truly focus on another person also includes the opportunity to say "Thank you" out of real gratitude for what someone else has done for us. This external focus coupled with a spirit of gratitude is a gift from God; therefore God exists.

Now strict evolutionary theorists may object at this point. They'd argue that our ability to care for others is simply a means to preserve the human species. They would say our ability to express gratitude is simply a biologically-determined ploy designed to ensure that others will be kind to us in return. But I disagree. There's something more going on here than just Darwinian survival of the fittest. All humans, you and I, have the ability to focus on another, care for another, and express sincere gratitude to another. That is no chance by-product of evolutionary design. This humble, grateful expression is a gift from God, a reflection of God's own loving, caring, covenant nature that has been imprinted onto every human heart. And as I said earlier, as it comes from God and mirrors God's own nature, God must exist as well.

This discussion about the nature of God is part of what makes today's scripture lesson so special. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, his final life journey, when he was confronted by a group of ten lepers begging for mercy. Jesus looked at them, making eye contact, which was something most other people refused to do. He told them to do what was commanded in the law of Leviticus – to show themselves to a priest who could declare them free of their skin disease. Then comes the best sentence of all: "And as they went, they were made clean" (Lk 17:14b). This band of misfit brothers, united by affliction, took off for Jerusalem only to discover along the way that their scabs, scars and deformed extremities were miraculously cured.

We're told this story, not because of the miracle, but because of what happened next. Ten were healed. One came back, praising God and anxious to say "Thank you" to Jesus. In that moment, the nature of God was revealed. Jesus said to him, "Rise and go your way. Your faith has made you well." The Greek verb used there means both "made you well" and "has saved you." Healing. Salvation. The will of God made tangibly visible in the space between a loving Savior and a kneeling, grateful ex-leper.

This story is much more than a morality fable. It's not just a trite lesson about nice manners from Jesus, who simply remind us here not to forget to say "Please" and "Thank you." Perfunctory gratitude by itself won't heal you or save you. I found a quote about gratitude on the Internet; it was attributed to Buddha, but I'm pretty sure my grandmother used to say it too: "Be thankful. If you didn't learn a lot today, at least you learned a little. And if you didn't learn a little, at least you didn't get sick. And if you got sick, at least you didn't die. So be thankful!"

Jesus is doing much more in this little drama than teaching about good manners. He wants us to glimpse some fundamental truths about the nature of God and our relationship with the Lord and one another. A group of lepers shouts from the side of the road. [Those who the world would keep at the margins, God would have us literally see.] Jesus sends the lepers off to show themselves to the priest. [Despite all in this life that would keep us apart, God would have us live in community as equals.] One man came back to Jesus – a Samaritan at that. [All whom we would see as less than us, whether from racism or class bias, God would have us recognize how precious they are and how much we can learn from them.] That Samaritan offered thanks and praise, and insodoing was healed and saved. [The loving focus of a grateful heart moves us out of ourselves, out of our pride and sin and self-centeredness into a place where real faith becomes possible.] In every act of true gratitude, God is there; therefore, God exists.

The parenting class here at ELPC has been reading "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee" [by Wendy Mogel], which combines Jewish teachings with parenting advice. In one chapter, the author says, "Jewish tradition encourages adults to say 100 blessings of gratitude a day. To fill a blessing quota this large, you have to be vigilant about looking for things to be thankful for. Ritually observant Jews don't waste any time. The moment after awakening, they say, "Thank you God for returning my soul to me." The next blessing is said after going to the bathroom because, wondrously, "the tubes and passages that should be open are open and those that should be closed are closed."

They sit down to breakfast and thank God for the food. They even offer a blessing when bad things happen: “Thank you, God, the true judge, for this test of my spiritual elevation.” The rabbis knew how easily we slip from counting our blessing to calculating our personal entitlements. That’s why for them the discipline of daily gratitude cultivates a right spirit and thankful awareness of God’s providential care.

When the lepers shouted at Jesus, “Master, have mercy on us,” the offer of healing was not made right then. He simply said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” As they went, they were healed. For nine of them, it seems this blessing did not live on beyond the tips of their rejuvenated fingers or enlarge their spirits beyond the confines of their own healed skin. But one of them – I think it was a Samaritan, or was it a Muslim, or a prostitute, a kid on a street corner, a wealthy frat boy, an Indian call center operator, a bag lady out panhandling – you fill in the category of outcast most pertinent to your view of life – anyway, one of them came back to Jesus to say “Thank you.” Jesus replied, “Where are the other nine? Will none return to praise God except this foreigner?” Then he said, “Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well.”

Yes, God exists. The certainty of that fact lies within us, but the proof for it is not found internally – in our brain, our heart, even in our soul. The proof itself is just beyond our fingertips, when we find ourselves focused on another, when we are moved by a spirit of gratitude and discover that we’ve stepped into the very presence of God.

And if that’s true, then what happens next? Well, we each have many choices for our personal ethics. There’s the ethics of “Me First”, the ethics of “My country right or wrong,” the ethics of self-preservation, survival of the fittest, or chasing the Almighty dollar. But if your religion is mostly about grace, then your Christian ethics will be mostly about gratitude.

So even if nine run on ahead – be the one who comes back. Be the one who says “Thank you.” Be the one whose every life decision is guided by gratitude. And you’ll know this for sure: God exists.

AMEN

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