

Gratitude: It Does a Spirit Good

The Story of the Ten Lepers

Luke 17:11-19
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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There are basically two kinds of people in this world. One can be described this way: Wherever they go, whatever they do, they can find something to complain about. The other are those folks who can go to the same place and do the very same thing, yet they can find something in which to be grateful.

Before we start pointing fingers and categorizing others, often these two kinds of people dwell within each one of us on any given day. And that's often a reflection of our mental and emotional well-being, along with the state of our spiritual condition at any given point.

Explaining how gratitude reflects upon and influences one's entire life, a Roman philosopher and great orator named Cicero, who lived decades before Jesus was even born, stated, "A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, it is the parent of all virtues." A thank-full heart.

Commenting on the scripture passage used as this morning's Gospel Reading from Luke 17, known as the story of The Ten Lepers (which I will address in just a moment), Alan Culpepper, writing in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary states, "**Gratitude may be the purest measure of one's character and spiritual condition.**" He goes on to warn, however, "The absence of the ability to be grateful reveals self-centeredness or the attitude that I deserve more than I ever get, so I do not need to be grateful."

There's something else related to self-centeredness that precludes our ability to live a life of gratitude, and that's a sense of entitlement. Entitlement derives from the belief that one is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment. Therefore, one has the right to expect certain benefits or conditions. This is usually accompanied with the often-denied or unrecognized understanding that others *don't* deserve the same treatment. Also, we can fall into the trap of taking for granted that which we receive on a regular basis, thereby forgetting to be grateful. While all of these elements and more can apply to anyone, they certainly contribute, for example, to the deeply imbedded sense of white privilege. We will be exploring this issue specifically in next Sunday's adult church school class.

With the recognition that there is great psychological, physiological, emotional, and spiritual value in the simple activity of giving thanks, showing appreciation, and expressing gratitude, perhaps we need a reminder of why this is such an important virtue to exhibit in our own lives, individually and in the life of this community of faith.

We should be grateful to the gospel writer Luke for sharing a story that helps us put this all into proper perspective. Luke tells us that Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem through the region between Samaria and Galilee. We learn ten people, suffering from the disease of leprosy, which could have been any number of skin diseases, approach

Jesus. They stand far off, as was in accordance with Jewish law. They cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Notice, however, that this is different from what the Levitical law required, which was to shout, "Unclean, unclean." Their words express, then, not a warning for Jesus to stay away, but rather a cry to him for help – perhaps even a desire for relationship.

Next we're told that Jesus, "saw them." It's easy to skip right over this small, seeming unimportant statement because it's obvious that Jesus saw them. **The Greek verb "to see," however, carried deep theological meaning for Luke, well beyond its literal meaning of just physical sight. To "see" also means to perceive and understand. You hear this in the expression, "I see what you mean."** In this case, Jesus perceived that people were in deep need, and he understood that he had an opportunity to do something about it.

Later on in the story (v. 15), Luke tells us that "one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice," and thanked Jesus. In this instance, *seeing* meant that the person not only realized he had been healed physically (as the other nine certainly must have realized as well), but more importantly this one particular person recognized that his life had been touched by the mercy and grace of God.

We are presented, then, with a challenge. How well do you and I actually "see" others in need, and then understand that we have an opportunity to do something about it? Conversely, like by the one who had leprosy and returned to give thanks, how well do you and I recognize God's blessings and grace and Sacred Presence in our lives.

The tough question we are faced with, then, is this: Are you and I always grateful for the blessings and grace, the healing and wholeness, that we are able to recognize in our own lives, in our family life, our professional life, and in the life of this congregation? In fact, **is the act of being grateful a quality and virtue that others would say describes your character, or describes our congregation?**

In this biblical story, with its profound connection between faith and gratitude, you may have noticed, however, that it has an interesting twist. The one who turned back to give thanks wasn't Jewish, like Jesus, but a Samaritan. You may recall that Samaritans were despised by the Jews. There were severe racial, social, and religious divisions and boundaries between them. (The Jews probably considered building a wall. Two thousand years later, with the Palestinians, the Israeli government has.) Therefore, it's very important to observe how uninterested Jesus seems to be in this man's personal faith or religious beliefs or political persuasion.

Jesus, then, provides a living example to us as to the broad inclusive grace extended to those to whom we are called to reach out to and minister. This can help us, for example, in our efforts to dismantle the systemic racism embedded within our society, and yes, within the church. But Jesus asks the thankful Samaritan, who as a person with leprosy was an outcast among outcasts, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (v. 17-18). What does the failure of the other nine to return and give thanks to God and express gratitude say about them? What does it say about faith? Put most simply, this story encourages us to **regard gratitude itself as an expression of our faith.**

The other nine people had been healed *physically*, being 'made clean,' but only the one who returned to express gratitude and praise God received the *spiritual*

dimension of Jesus' declaration of being 'made well.' Perhaps you have experienced something similar, **there is something life-giving about expressing gratitude and being a thankful person.**

Ironically, this biblical story about an outcast, unclean heretic (according to ancient Jewish standards) becomes a model of faith for us. I love that about the scriptures! This person was able to see beyond his physical healing to the One who made him whole - to God. **This person recognized not only the gift, but the Giver of the gift as well.** Interestingly, and important to note, there's not a faith tradition or type of spirituality anywhere in the world that *doesn't* include gratitude as a vital part of it's path to wholeness and well-being – to salvation.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *Reflections on the Psalms*, "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most: while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. **Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.**" And I want to leave you with another reflection from Alan Culpepper: "Here is a barometer of spiritual health: For those who have become aware of God's grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper." **What, then, is the measure of gratitude on your barometer of spiritual health?**

Like the Samaritan with leprosy, may we all be more intentional to pause, to recognize our blessings and the ways we experience healing and wholeness, and then remember to **respond with gratitude.** To which I want to take this opportunity to say how thankful and grateful I am to God, and to you, for the blessings that come with serving as your pastor.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting On the Word Biblical Commentary