

18th Sunday after Pentecost October 9 2022

Luke 17:11-19

“I’m grateful”

This is a response I’ve sometimes heard from people when asked, “How are you?” It would come even in the midst of challenges- whether irritating or major.

“I’m grateful”

During Lent of 2020 we read together Diana Butler Bass’ book *Grateful*. In it she talks about the power of gratitude in our lives. She found in her research (and I have affirmed in more recent studies) that expressing gratitude... especially saying thank you... correlates to being more satisfied, being happier in your life.

The vice president of marketing for Motivosity, who conducted a recent poll, said they found a “dramatic correlation between gratitude and happiness.” They found that when people are proactive about being grateful it, “rewires their brain to look for positives instead of negatives around them.”

Looking at these studies through the lens of faith, expressing gratitude causes us to repent (to change our minds), it re-orientes us towards God, our neighbors, and our stuff. It opens our eyes to see the truth of things and how we fit into this world.

Naaman had this re-orientation happen to him.

A warrior bold and true. Rich in physical and political power, with wealth and might to spare he finds this all threatened when he is found to have leprosy. A

skin disease that separates him from society and threatens all he has. Despite his power and wealth, nothing could be done.

This man of might has to listen to a slave girl- someone he captured and forcibly took from her homeland and family. She provides hope for a cure, restoration, he hopes, to his old life. So Naaman goes to the Prophet Elisha backed by all the visible signs of his wealth and power- chariots, troops, gold-- and is furious when Elisha won't behave as Naaman thinks he ought to. Furious at not being accorded the respect he thinks he is owed, Naaman storms off, ready to go home.

Once again, Naaman must listen to his slaves, and when he does and goes to wash, he finds the leprosy gone. He returns to Elisha and proclaims his belief in the God of Israel who has cured him.

All the wealth, power, and arrogance of Naaman could not save him from his own body. From disease. A reminder that he is just like the rest of us. In the end, what saved him was the grace of God, an undeserved gift of healing given freely. And in that moment, Naaman was changed. He saw God, the world, and his place in it, differently.

The same is true of the leper who returns to Jesus.

Ten were healed, even though all they asked for was mercy. Ten turned to follow Jesus' command and the ten, no doubt, were surprised by their discovery of their healing. The Rev. David Lose writes, "Perhaps some were overjoyed. Perhaps some celebrated. Perhaps others ran to tell their family and friends. Perhaps a few even took it for granted. Who knows? What we do know is that one not only felt thankful but decided to actually give voice to those emotions, to express his gratitude to Jesus and to God. Gratitude is indeed a response to the blessings of

life, but it is also a choice to see those blessings, name them, and express our gratitude in word and deed.”

Gratitude, giving thanks, is a core component of Christian living, because gratitude awakens us to God’s grace- to see it active in our lives and name it. Gratitude focuses our attention on how God showers us with gifts; abundant love, Jesus, the Holy Spirit. Daily bread, the web of relationships around us, the air we breathe, the shelter we are in. When we are closed off from gratitude, it means we are not open to the fullness of God’s grace.

Those nine other men with leprosy were probably grateful, but only one stopped- turned back to the one who was source of his healing- and visibly expressed that thanks. An act that, we have found, leads to even greater happiness.

Expressing thanks can be difficult, because in that thanks is an acknowledgement that the thing we have or receive is ultimately not because of something we have done. On Wednesday, one of the children present said you thank your Mom for providing a yummy meal. That thank you was an acknowledgement that he could not have provided that meal himself. A recognition that he is dependent on his mother and father for food, clothes, shelter, etc. While Naaman does not explicitly say thank you, his return to Elisha shows a much humbler man. One who listens to slaves and knows that his wealth and power mean nothing to God and God’s servant who cured him.

Gratitude recognizes that God, as creator of all that exists, is the giver of these gifts and we are all the beneficiaries. That everything is a gift- universe, life, air, soil, water, friendship, love, family. Gratitude, Bass reminds us, is also something

that lies in passing those gifts that we have (which aren't ours to begin with) on to others.

The humility of gratitude, that recognition that everything we have is gift from another, brings life because it restores us to right relationship with God- giver of all gifts- and those other beloved creatures of God who are the people around us. We recognize that what we have is gift and those gifts are meant to be shared with others, because we can't take any of it with us when we go.

Theologian Karl Barth says that gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning. The greatest expression of God's grace to us comes in the waters of baptism. A washing that can seem innocuous to some who, like Naaman, wonder if they might not just take a bath at home. But when they dip into those waters of baptism, when they are attentive to what happens there- find that they too are freed from all that causes them dis-ease. In baptism- the old self that thinks like Naaman that we can do life on our own is drowned. That voice that tells you you aren't good enough, or smart enough, or cool enough is drowned and the voice of God reminds us- you are my beloved child, and you are enough.

And in the face of this grace, what words do we have to say, but thank you! Praising God with a loud voice, acknowledging that there is no God in all the earth but the one who has come to us in Jesus Christ. Who heals us with a word and calls us to follow him. Who is the source of our daily bread, our gifts, skills and talents. The wealth we enjoy.

And this gratitude reminds us that what we have is gift, and these gifts are to be shared. That includes being generous with our own wealth, our skills and talents

so that others might have enough. This is part of what we do with the estimate of giving cards in our stewardship campaign. A way of saying thank you.

But it also means sharing this attitude of gratitude. Finding ways to speak aloud, “I am grateful”. To be intentional in thanking, sincerely thanking, those who serve us. Those who help us. To not assume we are owed, but to receive each thing as a gift.

Actually saying aloud, “Thank you.” What joy might that bring into someone’s life? The fast food worker who is stretched thin because there aren’t enough workers in their shift and is trying to do two jobs, who keeps getting rude remarks about slow service, but who is greeted by your smile and a sincere thank you when you receive your order. What spark of joy might that bring? I’m sure you can think of many other scenarios where we could gift people with a bit of gratitude.

I would encourage you to focus on gratitude this week. As you wake up or go to sleep, just list those things you are thankful for and then say aloud, “Thank you, Lord”. I encourage you to be attentive to where you can spread that joy of saying thank you this week. Give it a try and see both how you feel as you do it and what effect it seems to have on others.

As we do, I wonder if we might not find the truth in how Jesus sends the healed Samaritan on his way, “Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well.”