



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

The Way: Gratitude

October 13, 2019

Text: Luke 17: 11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, ‘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?’ Then he said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’

Sermon:

Diana Butler Bass still remembers that day clear as a bell. It was a fall day, very much like this one, when she walked out to her mailbox. Spilling out from among all the solicitations and magazines that clogged her mailbox was a soft, almost velvet-like envelope; it was deep red like the color cranberry and was the kind of thing you just couldn’t wait to open. Inside was an equally stunning card with only one word on the cover: Gratitude. Opening that card, she read in beautiful, flowing script the following, “Dear Diana, Thank you so much for your lovely Thank you note.” She said she read it again to make sure she had gotten it right. And then she went into that place of panic that comes out of a rule of living with Miss Manners and proper etiquette, and where gifts are a commodity to be responded to. She asked, “What do you do next? Do you send a thank you note for the thank you note you received for sending a thank you note?” Where does it all end? —she wondered.

That is part of the question: where does this practice of thanking—not just in notes with velvet envelopes—but where does this notion of gratitude end? For nine of them, it ended in their healing. It was their physical being made well, and they scurried off to resume their lives, to clutch their families and really, who can blame them? After all, for the ten lepers it had been a life of exile and isolation. To be a leper at that time meant you were confined to live outside the village; you were confined to live alone or with fellow lepers. They were shouting at Jesus not because they were rude or impolite but rather because the rule said they could not get within speaking distance of anyone. They were confined to a life outside both literally and figuratively. So you can’t blame any of them for wanting to run and get back inside to resume their lives, but one of them (and here’s the critical part)—one of them lingered.

The Bible tells us that one of them *turned*; he turned in that moment to fall at the feet of Jesus, for as the French proverb goes, “Gratitude is the memory of the heart.”

What the Bible tells us and science does as well is that gratitude is not just a backward looking thing; more than anything, it shapes how we look at the future—and how we live into that future. You see, gratitude is not just about memory; it’s about possibility. Often in our world, thank you’s are part of convention; they’re a part of *quid pro quo*. Someone gives you something, and you’re obligated to respond. It runs the risk of creating an economy of currency, where we always feel indebted. Think about ancient times when a great benefactor would hold his people under his thumb by giving them small things and expecting big things in return, but like so many things, the Bible turns many of our conventions upside down. When you encounter gratitude in the Bible, it isn’t an obligation to anyone—even and especially not to God. Instead, it’s an orientation; it’s a practice. It’s an attitude.

Karl Barth writes that gratitude is tightly interwoven with this idea of grace. Grace is what we are given that’s thoroughly unmerited. It’s when somebody who owes us nothing instead gives us everything, and Barth says that a life of living in gratitude is inextricably bound to the idea of grace. This is what he says, “Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth; grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo; gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning.” This thing about gratitude is that it doesn’t fit within the neatly prescribed barriers of anything; instead, it is transcendent; it is subversive; it is alternative; it is life giving and thoroughly emotional. Perhaps most importantly, this thing about gratitude is that it is often unplanned and unexpected. Think about that moment in your life where you experienced grace, either from an act of God or from one of your neighbors—something that was so overwhelming and so un-thought of that in your heart you just felt this space of profound gratitude that cannot be described.

You see, we don’t calculate or pick out gratitude; instead, we live into it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected that we always in our lives receive infinitely more than we can ever give. He says that not to make us feel guilty or compel us to do anything but rather to recognize the myriad of gifts that come our way every day that often have nothing to do with what we’ve done or failed to do. Here in New England and here in the United States of America, we like to be individualists; we like to be able to accomplish things; we like to be recognized for what we do, and yet in the Bible, this concept of gratitude flows out of grace—something given, never earned.

In this stewardship season, as we contemplate this way of Jesus and as we contemplate what we give back—first and foremost let go of what you owe or what you feel obligated to; instead, see the abundance of blessings all around you and simply participate in that abundance and blessing. Many of you know that my favorite hymn in all of hymnody is *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. It’s my favorite hymn because I think it captures perhaps better than any other the fullness of our faith experience and the way I understand faith to sprout and grow and then blossom. It carries the idea of blessings pouring down on us and at the same time the fact that I still wander. There’s the idea of streams of mercy poured out extravagantly that results in endless praise coming from our lips. The idea is expressed of finding the mount and fixing our gaze upon it, but the second verse of the hymn holds the whole key in moving

from obligated thank you's to this life of gratitude. That's the one where you sing, "Here I raise my Ebenezer," trusting that everyone else knew the meaning of that word, even if you didn't. In the New Century Hymnal they get nervous about such things, so they took out the word 'Ebenezer,' thinking no one would know what it meant. Instead they wrote, "Here I pause in my sojourning, giving thanks for having come. Come to trust at every turning you will guide me safely home. The key moment in this story is not the one who prays at Jesus' feet. Notice that Jesus doesn't command him to do anything other than to return home. The key moment in this story is when he turns and pauses, and that is when gratitude comes forth and can sprout in our lives.

One of the things I love about the children's story recounting this is that in the picture his face was amazed. He couldn't understand what had happened there, and his face reflected that confusion. But it also held amazement and wonder. Diana Butler Bass raises this story; do you remember the story for Epiphany—the story of the Magi? She has one of the most beautiful interpretations I've ever read; here's what she said. "It's a story no doubt that Mary told her son Jesus over and over again until he took it into his heart. The fact that when those Magi came—those kings coming to the lowly stable bringing gifts of great magnitude—they were so beyond the pale, there was nothing she could possibly do to respond to them. There was no way she could ever repay the debt of what they were giving her, and though they were leaving, she had no forwarding address to even send a thank you note. So, if you remember in the Gospel of Luke, Mary 'pondered it.' She brought it into her heart. And there, Butler Bass says, she found gratitude because there was nothing she could do about this gift except for simply accepting it, taking it in and loving it. There is no commodity being exchanged here; there is nothing we have earned that we have to pay back. It is a thing simply to ponder.

For gratitude is an emotion; it is a thing of the heart. It doesn't just emerge from the heart but is something that strengthens the heart and enriches the heart. Are you ready for this? Physiological research is showing us that those who live their lives in a gratitude-filled way have a lower overall heart rate. Their anxiety levels are lower, and they find pleasure in much smaller things, and are you ready for this? Statistically, grateful people live longer. Psychological research such as that done by Robert Emmons shows that when you have gratitude in your heart, it drives out those toxic emotions of resentment, anger and envy. None of those emotions are showing up in these times, are there? Sociological research such as that done by David DeSteno's from Northeastern University finds that when incorporated into a practice of living, being grateful increases our resilience and it's a springboard for life that ever searches for deeper meaning. Isn't that the invitation Jesus gives us in this way of his?

It turns out that some of the people who are most grateful in their lives are those who through some trauma or diagnosis are forced to pause and then consider or contemplate. In my own work and experience I will tell you this—that when I work with people who are facing the end of their lives, the emotion I find more than any other is a sense of gratitude. While I was in the woods this week, I had a chance to talk with my stepmother. Biologically, things are not going very well; they had gone up to a cabin and my stepmother had forgotten to bring her morphine pills, so she was stuck there for a couple days in significant pain and unable to move. So you know what she did? She sat in front of the great big picture window, and she looked out in northern Wisconsin, and said to me, "Brent, I swear to you that in those two days, I saw the

leaves turn. I saw them actually change color! I have never in my life actually seen leaves turn. I have taken them for granted. And yet because of this, I got to see something I have never seen in my seventy years of living.” Make no mistake about it; she would do anything not to have to face the future she has. But in the midst of this moment where she is forced to slow down and to pause, she is discovering great joys. She said to me something I’ve never heard her say, “Brent, I find the greatest pleasure simply in sitting next to your dad and holding his hand.” Sometimes it turns out that in order to find this life of gratitude, we need an external impetus—if nothing else to simply pause that we might turn.

There’s the story of Elie Wiesel, famous survivor of the concentration camps in Europe, who survived years of suffering and pondering, and this is what he came to know: every hour is grace. He feels gratitude in his heart each time he meets someone and looks at his or her smile. Neither of these two people would say that their gratitude suddenly erases the hardship they find; in fact, sometimes a life of gratitude increases the difficulty of the suffering because we come to appreciate the fragile nature of life. You see, the definition of gratitude is truly appreciating that the true gift of life is love and connection.

That is what we do when we come to church; we create this safe place for people to explore the fullness of their life in the safety of community, so that in and through one another we can see the gifts that are all around us that we so seldom slow down to even notice. But there is a continually expanding circle of grace and gift. If you read the Bible, there are these targeted miracle stories that grace seems to fall on certain people, and it’s easy to think, ‘Why not me?’ But real gratitude consists of realizing how many times grace falls on all of us. Think about these other stories in the Bible. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ first miracle is lavishing drunken wedding guests with 140 gallons of wine—a gift poured out for everybody. Jesus talks all the time about throwing seeds indiscriminately on the ground that they might just simply sprout and grow. In every single Gospel there are invitations for the unnamed poor simply to come to dinner. There are parties thrown in Luke’s Gospel for that wayward son who disappeared and then came home, and in all the gospels there is that story of thousands showing up and Jesus feeding every single one of them. Grace abounds. It’s there if we just stop and look at it. So how do we do it? Two quick things: first, whatever you’re doing on this merry-go-round or treadmill of life, stop. Then do as he did, which is simply to pray.

This is going to bother you, though. Gratitude is not something you can doggedly pursue. It is not something you can have a plan for. It is not something that you work at. Instead, what research shows is that people who are grateful practice this thing called *turning*—just simply recognizing that the invitation is there, and then open yourself up to see the grace that abounds. Gratitude is a way of walking with Jesus, emerging not as a choice or an obligation but rather a turning, a reply, an invitation, which is why on this Sunday we’re going open our mouths not just to sing, but that our lives might turn. “Come thou fount of *every blessing*... Tune my heart to sing your praise.” Amen.



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor