

Noticing Gratitude  
Texts: II Corinthians 4:7-18, Luke 17:11-9  
Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – July 18, 2021  
Rev. Michael F. Atzert

“A steaming dinner was served on fine bone china. I was surprised, impressed, and starved. I looked to the other guests to see if it was appropriate to begin eating, but no one had lifted a fork. Our host stood in the middle of the room. ‘Please bow your heads,’ the small, professorial man with bifocals began in a tone of reverential authority. ‘Lord, thank you for this culinary masterpiece. It is a beautiful piece of art. We are grateful for your gift.’ He paused. Did I hear right? Did he call this meal art? I was surprised. I just wanted to indulge, and he was turning my dinner into a Rembrandt. Get serious. We waited. Were we supposed to be reflecting, or was he having a senior moment? I was about to reach for my fork...’ And Lord, we pray for the immigrant laborers who picked the beans. We know they often encounter injustice, low wages, and difficult working conditions. We also pray for justice. As well, we pray for their families and the provision of their life’s basic necessities. We also pray for those who advocate on their behalf and fight for their rights.’ My mood sank; this was not going to be an instant grace.

‘We also pray for those truck drivers who drive our freeways to deliver our food, often away from their families for days on end. And we pray for those who labor in the potato fields under the hot sun, day after day. May they experience your grace in the midst of their monotonous, backbreaking work. We thank you for their sacrifice. And,’ he went on without a breath, ‘for those who have cooked this meal and will wash our dishes, we are grateful. We are grateful, as well, that they have given us the time so that we may engage in exercises of the mind and spirit. We thank you for releasing us from

the burden of just eking out a living. This is a privilege.’ My mind was screaming, *Amen, amen, amen!*

‘And now...let us enjoy this food that has come to us from so many hands and over so many miles. May we savor it. May we delight in its every morsel. And may our company be as delicious as the food before us.’ He paused, then quietly said, ‘Amen.’ Silence. Slowly the heads rose and eyes opened, looking a little tentative and stunned. We had just been jolted into recognizing the miracle of our meal...

As I looked at the roasted yams, I had a whole new appreciation for their presence. Now I tried to savor their texture and taste. I tried to eat them in a spirit of gratitude. The prayer had jolted me out of my myopic vision – the self-centered greediness that is so easy to slip into, believing that everything in the world is there for me – into a place of considering others’ lives and sacrifices. That prayer called me to take notice of what I so often take for granted – the gift of food. That prayer called me to step outside myself, suspend the impulse of hunger, and engage in a moment that would move me closer to what God hopes for me” (Bruce Main. Spotting the Sacred. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006. pp. 59-61). Bruce Main is such a gifted writer and storyteller, and his story there jolted me out of my complacency into thinking more about the ways I express and show gratitude and for what and whom – and ways I do not.

In this familiar text for us this morning from the Gospel of Luke, we have the story of the ten lepers. This is a story about an encounter with the living and powerful Savior of the world, Jesus Christ, and the response of some who needed His presence and power in their lives the most. For you see, lepers were indeed the outcasts of society. Because this disease affected their skin, people with leprosy were thought to be able to

pollute others. They lived separately from everyone else. You can see that even as they called to Jesus. The lepers kept their distance from Him as they called to Him, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

Yet, Jesus is not afraid of them – not afraid to be near them or to offer them His healing touch. He gave them the simple command of going and showing themselves to the priest, and they were made clean! Imagine how they must have felt, to go from outcast of society to regular member of a community in the matter of a moment.

However, only one of them turned back, praised God, and thanked Jesus. And he was a Samaritan. Samaritans, as you may remember, were bitter enemies of the Jewish people. Yet, I guess when everyone is an outcast, you stick together with whomever you can. But again, only one returned to give thanks.

Is that not how life is in our world today? We live in a society of entitlement, and that seems to only get worse year after year – especially after the year we have had. When I receive something good and positive, it is because I deserve it and nothing more. Showing gratitude, then, might be considered a sign of weakness or perhaps someone might think of taking this thing away from me if I make too much of a fuss in gratitude. Our signs of gratitude, if any, are half-hearted and brief.

And for some, it is the same way in our relationship to God. Certainly, we thank God for healing, for miracles, and for the BIG answers to prayers. That is a no-brainer! Do we stop to notice gratitude in the little things of life, though? Do we thank God for our 10-year old cars, our hand-me-down clothes, even for finding something lost after we have prayed to God that He would show us where it is? Sad to say, I know that I am guilty many times of not stopping to notice the small things worthy of gratitude in my

life. I do not take as much time as I should to show express the gratitude for big and small things to God.

For that is what the healed Samaritan did. He took the time to express gratitude to Jesus, who had just been responsible for his healing. Jesus told this Samaritan, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” He was closer to being whole than he had been in a long time, if ever. He, no doubt, would still face challenges in returning to society with his family, his friends, and complete strangers. However, that did not matter. He noticed this as an opportunity to express gratitude to his Master and Lord, Jesus Christ, where none of the rest of them did.

How can we take the time to notice opportunities for gratitude in our life? It takes a commitment. It takes effort and an intentionality. Henri Nouwen, a Dutch-born Catholic priest and writer, had this to say about gratitude. “The choice for gratitude rarely comes without some real effort. But each time I make it, the next choice is a little easier, a little freer, and a little less self-conscious. Because every gift I acknowledge reveals another and another until, finally, even the most normal, obvious and seemingly mundane event or encounter proves to be filled with grace” (Henri Nouwen. The Return of the Prodigal Son. New York: Doubleday, 1992. p. 85). The more effort we make in noticing and showing and expressing gratitude, the more we can experience moments of God’s grace in our lives.

What do we have to be thankful for? Certainly, the big things like healing and wholeness and restored relationships and celebrations like the birth of a baby or a new marriage. We can also be thankful for the little things in life – the things that we might miss if we were not noticing times of gratitude in our life. We can notice gratitude in all

things of our lives. Why? Because it is our God, the Father of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who gives us each and every one of these opportunities to notice. Christ indeed heals us, makes us whole, restores us so that we can have a relationship with God. Is that not enough to spark us to notice gratitude in all things? Think about it. Let us pray...

Loving and merciful God, we thank You. Plain and simple, we just thank You for all that You do for us, for the many blessings around us that come from You. Help us, in the daily stresses and pressures of life, notice times to show our gratitude to others and especially to You, the author and perfecter of our faith. We ask this in the name of Your Son, whom You gave to us in love, Jesus Christ, Amen.