

“The Challenge of Gratitude” 10-9-16

Old Testament, Psalm 66

New Testament, Luke 17:11-19

Living life with a spirit of thanksgiving and gratitude does not come naturally to us. This encounter with Jesus and the lepers is enough for us to press the pause button and reflect for a moment. Do I live a life within that flows naturally outward with words of blessing for God and others? Do I demonstrate gratitude for the gifts God and others extend to me? Am I quick to say thank you to another? Am I prone to bring to mind what I don't have in my work, life, or church before I am willing to see the blessings, if at all?

We live in a culture which does not nurture the value of gratitude. We expect to receive certain services and gifts from not only our families but the government. The generations born after 1946 have been shaped by the expectation of an individualism expressing itself in slogans such as, “Have it your way”, “But I'm worth it”, “If it feels good, do it”, “You deserve it”, or “You only go around once in life so grab all the gusto” you can. Instant gratification is the operating value driving our socially acceptable self-referenced individualism. Like the nine lepers who received Jesus' healing as an entitlement, we don't even stop to think about the many gifts and blessings coming to us each day.

One of my wake up calls occurred when I was in College. A close friend's family had invited me to join them for a weekend skiing in Breckenridge, Colorado. They rented the condo, provided transportation, and paid for the food. I did buy my own lift ticket. I recall being taken home that Sunday evening, grabbing my gear, being thanked for going, and responding with a casual, “Sure, that was fun”. Without thinking, I had just taken for granted a generous gift that had been given. I acted like I was entitled as I reflect upon it.

After a couple of weeks my friend said, “I need to talk with you. My parents are offended. They have received no thank you note and don't think that you appreciated or enjoyed the weekend”. Essentially he was telling me that my lack of expressed gratitude wasn't going over very well. I had to swallow that one and own that they were correct in their assessment. So I sat down and penned a letter of apology for my behavior and acknowledged the gift with an appropriate expression of thanks.

Betty and I wonder when we don't receive acknowledgement for an anniversary or birthday gift given. Did they receive the gift? Did they not like it? Recently, after a couple of months we asked our married son if they liked the anniversary gift that we gave. “Oh, sure, we loved it!” The same thing occurs with our grandkids and their gifts. I confess to not always being polite to my parents in this regard, either. Certain expectations and entitlements have a hold on our attitudes and mindsets in this culture.

Author Richard Foster emphasizes the importance of learning to cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving. Stressing that expressions of gratitude do not come naturally to human beings and need cultivation, he adds, “Anyone who has children needs no further elaboration on that point” (Foster, “The Challenge of

the Disciplined Life”, p.48). Shakespeare’s King Lear in the day of his own tragedy says, “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.” I pray for most this morning such is not the case.

Having said that, in every generation there are exceptions. Jesus takes time to notice the one Samaritan in a crowd of Israelites turning back and prostrating himself at Jesus’ feet and thanking him. Jesus responds, “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?”

The list of those in the New Testament responding gratefully to Jesus include, in addition to this Samaritan leper, a widow, a tax collector and sinner, and infants and little children. Those grateful are all excluded and considered outside the circle of God’s grace by the Jewish faith community. Again, King Lear, “Blow, blow, thou winter wind, thou art not so unkind as man’s ingratitude.”

There may be a personal crisis prompting a person to go to church and pursue God’s help. Help in some form arrives, things work out, and then the person disappears from church and so does any active pursuit of a life in God. God isn’t needed anymore. Gratitude is often shallow. To the Temple official whose son was very ill and pursued Jesus to ask for the possibility of healing him, Jesus says, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe” (John 4:48). But Jesus heals the man’s son anyway. Did the man or his son ever express gratitude? We don’t know. Though God extends grace to all, not all offer gratitude. God continues to extend love and grace to us anyway.

That raises a question for me. How do I nurture a heart of gratitude? After all, we cannot become what we are not. If I am naturally a thankful person then what is it that allows me to be so? The New Testament is written by people who face death, misfortune, and betrayal every day. Yet one overhears through their words a joy, a gratitude and praise unmatched anywhere for people in their situation.

Paul challenges the Colossians; “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...and be thankful...And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:15, 17).

The last hymn we will sing this morning is written by a German pastor during the death and destruction of the Thirty Years’ War in Europe. Martin Rinkart’s hymn is entitled “Now Thank We All Our God”. Pastor Rinkart had buried so many people dying from the plague, famine, and the war that by all standards he should have been unable to gather any sort of praise or thanks to God.

Where do we begin to do so? One place to begin is in our understanding and experience of God. One of the keystones of the protestant faith is gratitude, a gratitude grounded in the sheer grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. If I have come to understand and experience what Christ has done for me, a deep act of love so profound that I could never repay it, would I not be released from striving to earn that love? No longer would God be someone to appease or be placated by my efforts in order for God to love me.

Augustine asks a good question; “Who can be good, if not made so by loving?” In the film, “As Good As it Gets”, Jack Nicholson, playing the character Melvin Udall, an obsessive-compulsive author who is rude to

everyone, finds a relationship with the only waitress who will serve him. At one point in their conversation he says to her, "You make me want to be a better man". I strive for holiness not in order to make God love me. I do so because I have no doubts that God already loves me. It is that love which transformed Peter and the disciples as they met the Resurrected Christ. It is the same experience and reality of God that transformed Luther and Calvin. They acknowledged that no human being has any righteousness within to commend him or her to God, but we "are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Romans 3:24-5).

Nancy Mairs writes in her book, "Ordinary Time", of her years spent fighting against her childhood images of a "Daddy God". This God could only be appeased if she followed a rigid list of prohibitions and prescriptions. How can love and gratitude come from that?

She writes, "I was forever on the perilous verge of doing a don't, to atone for which I had to beg forgiveness from the very being who had set me up for trespass....the God of the Gotcha" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.325).

She describes feeling constantly guilty. What happened? She experienced the transforming grace of God's love revealed in Christ. God was no longer a 'Gotcha' God. She put it this way; "I learned to thrive in the care of a God who asks for the single act that will make transgression impossible: love" (p. 325). Jesus makes us want to be better people.

In this vein Augustine writes, "If you but love God you may do as you incline". Love gives birth to gratitude. We no longer need spend our days trying to figure out what we can get away with. Rather, gratitude continues to be inspired "trying to fathom, not exploit, God's grace" (P. p.325).

There is freedom in gratitude. We can hold things lightly. We don't have to grab. Rather, we can receive instead of trying to achieve a life. We don't earn anything in God's economy. We see ourselves as stewards since all is God's. Tangible and intangible things come and go. Gratitude allows us to sit loose with life's gifts, to be grateful when they come and thankful when God takes them away. Why? I think it is simple. We are grounded in God's love and not in those things (Foster, p.49).

In the Old Testament we read of the Thank Offering. This would take place after the harvest as an expression of gratitude for God's blessings. It was a visual, tangible gift of gratitude flowing from an awareness of God's blessings.

The same is true of our stewardship gifts of time, money, and talents this season. They are expressions of our love and gratitude for God's blessings in our lives.

We nurture our gratitude through faithful worship, communicating with God in prayer, Christian fellowship and service, and by taking time to reflect each day on the blessings of God in our lives. These things are nurtured and as we seek to abide in Christ and allow him to abide in us, we will bear much fruit. Since gratitude does not come naturally, we work at it, nurture it, and learn to live into it.

In that sense, gratitude is its own reward. It multiplies itself not only in our lives, in our love for God, but in the lives of those around us. Gratitude is the greatest gift and witness to God's love we can offer within an ungrateful world. It is one way people may see Christ in us.

I encourage us all to take on the challenge of gratitude.