

GIFT & GRATITUDE

Luke 17: 11-19

Some years ago now I saw an interview with a young woman who was a Syrian refugee. She was being asked how she felt about being in Canada. Even though she had suffered staggering loss of family members, friends, home and a life she loved; even though she had to come to a new place, learn a new language, learn new ways of doing things, find new friends; even though she had suffered the violence and violation that happens to people in time of war and in refugee camps where people are vulnerable to being preyed upon; in spite of all this and more, the only thing she wanted to emphasize was this: gratitude: gratitude for Canada opening its doors to her and people like her; gratitude for all the opportunities being afforded her; gratitude that she had a chance at a new life; gratitude. Her purpose now was to make something of her life here in Canada and give something back. She was passionate, emotional, and articulate about it all... Gratitude...

How grateful are we? I know we talk about gratitude a lot. Study after study has come out on the health benefits of expressing gratitude and feeling thankful. Thanksgiving makes us feel good and it makes others feel good too when we thank them. It adds years to our life, and it gives quality to our life. So why is gratitude something we have to think about? Why is it something we need to be reminded to do? Gratitude should be natural and easy for us. But it's not. Why?

Well, to help us dig deeper into the reasons why the practice of gratitude is undermined in our society, let's dig deeper into our scripture reading this morning.

On his way to Jerusalem, we're told, Jesus enters a village, and there, we're told, he encounters ten "lepers." Imagine being called not Sam or John, Ivan or Mohammad, Sarah, Grace or Fahime, but a "leper". Imagine if the first thing people see who see you is not you but your condition, disease or what many see as a disability. How dehumanizing is that?

So then, these folks were suffering not only a physical condition that was visibly repulsive and difficult to live with, but they were also suffering the stigma of social repulsion and moral condemnation too. If everything happens for a reason, as people believed then as much as many believe today, being so struck by such an ugly illness must have meant someone had secret sins deserving of punishment and suffering. You suffer the physical disease, the social repulsion and the spiritual condemnation too. How awful!

So, who are the lepers among us today? Who are those people today find repulsive or stay away from because of their race, colour, religion, sexuality or gender expression?... Maybe it's those drag queens reading books to children in libraries who are modern day lepers for many... Or maybe it's a disability of some kind or neuro-diverse way of being that keeps us away from some people... Or maybe it's their criminal record or the smell and dirt on them because they live on the street... Finding a reason to blame someone for their situation can let us off the hook from having to care enough to get close, befriend them and put ourselves out there to do something that costs us or inconveniences us to defend them or care for them.

Well, what about Jesus? These folks labelled "lepers" have heard about Jesus. They have heard that he is a compassionate healer. And so they come to Jesus, keeping their distance of course, but come to him they do, begging, pleading and crying out, saying: "Jesus, master, have mercy on us!" Mercy is about healing the whole person – body and soul, mind, heart and spirit. "Have mercy on us, O Jesus!"

And Jesus? Well, his compassion is not in drawing a lot of attention on them or himself, making a show of what he can do or embarrassing them in front of a crowd who would be wagging their fingers and shaking their heads. No! Jesus simply tells them this: "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Why? Well, in that world, those with the privilege, power and wealth also ran the temple in Jerusalem. Rules around being clean and unclean were meant to control who was accepted and who was rejected, who was in and who was out. Lepers were definitely out. Priests would function like public health officials. If they declared you clean, you were clean.

Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priests because on their way, something astonishing will happen to them. They will be healed. But will they believe it? Jesus is the healer and the power in him is the medicine. But without their faith, the medicine of Jesus' compassionate healing energy can only go so far. Faith works with the power of God and sometimes astonishing things happen in the body as much as they do in the heart and spirit.

OK, so they make their way and what happens? Here's what we're told: "As they went, they were made clean." In other words, their bodily condition, their skin rash, the leprous lesions, whatever it was they had that was called "leprosy" began to disappear. Wow! Astonishing!...

But you know, this is not the reason this story is included in the gospel. There are plenty of healing stories in the gospels. There's a reason why each one is included. Why is this one in particular included? Because of what happens next. One of the ten making their way to Jerusalem stops. He turns back, we're told, "praising God with a loud voice." He comes all the way back to Jesus and falls down at his feet thanking him profusely.

But, we're told one more thing about him: "he was a Samaritan." What's the big deal about that? Well, Jesus is a Jew. The other nine lepers were Jews. This one is a Samaritan. Samaritans

and Jews hate each other. Their feud goes back centuries. To befriend a Samaritan let alone help one out is like turning your back on your own people. What price would you pay to do the right thing for someone else, even if they are thought of as your enemy? Jesus tears through all kinds of boundaries in his healing ministry. Jesus is willing to risk the hostility if not rejection of his own people to love someone thought to be an enemy of his people.

OK, so what can we learn from this remarkable story about gratitude on this Thanksgiving Sunday?

1. First of all, one of the biggest barriers to thanksgiving is privilege and a sense of entitlement that turns everything we're given into a right we deserve or something we have earned. Privilege also means we rarely notice so many things we're given every single day, things we take for granted. From housing, to food, to health, to freedom and safety to be and do as we like, to education and medical care, to second and third and fourth chances when we mess up, and so much more, nothing is a given and many in our world don't have what we do. Are we more deserving than they, have we earned it all in a way others have not? Are we truly worthy in a way others are not to receive the privileges, the understanding, the acceptance and the forgiveness we have received?

Those of us who have known hardship or have made mistakes in some way or have known threat to our freedom to be and do in some way, are much more inclined not to take things for granted. The Samaritan will turn back and make his way back to Jesus just to say thank you. The others are fellow Jews and they've already made their way far toward Jerusalem. They are desperate to get their health check, their ticket to freedom and their re-integration into society. They don't have time to return to thank Jesus even if they have thought about it. How sad. But are we any better?...

2. But there's another angle to all this too. Sometimes, we're so desperate for help, so focussed on our needs, so preoccupied by our issues that we fail to see all that we're given and all that we receive despite our challenges. We can become so immersed in all that's wrong that gratitude is the last thing we think about even when there's much to be grateful for if we have a mind to recognize it. Our neediness is the other side of the coin of our privilege. Both ends of the spectrum are barriers to our greater need to feel gratitude and the privilege we are given to express it. The Samaritan's neediness for healing and his urgency for getting a certificate of cleanliness once healed so he could go back to normal life with his family and friends, were no barriers to him recognizing the wondrous gift he had received. His heart was not poisoned by his physical suffering or social condemnation. He recognized in Jesus the kind of generous love he could not take for granted. The other nine were so focused on what they needed, gratitude was the last thing on their minds and in their hearts.

3. And this brings us to the final point. Until we recognize all that we have and all that we are that is good as gifts, we will never develop a heart that truly knows gratitude. In a world where everyone has to compete and earn and make-believe they deserve what they have, imagine developing relationships at home, at work, in your community, relationships where everything you receive from others is a gift and gratitude is your response. And imagine relationships you cultivate with others with everything you give to them as a gift to which their response back is gratitude. What healing and wholeness would be inspired in our world if gift and gratitude rather than privilege or self-absorbed desperation were the drivers for our interactions.

I can treat what you give to me as something I deserve, as my right, or I can treat it as a gift. It's my choice. And you can treat what I give to you as a gift for which you give back to me your gratitude, or as something you deserve or need and therefore a right to be claimed rather than a gift to be grateful for. Gratitude is a gift I give to you for the gift of something you give to me. And gratitude is the gift others give to me for the gift I have given to them. When I offer something with my heart it is not just a duty or a necessity or something I do because it's my job and I'm paid to do it. I do it because I choose to do it and offer it from my heart as a gift. Imagine if more of what I do for others is done that way from my heart as a gift. And imagine if others offer me their genuine gratitude for something they need from me or pay me to do, recognizing my heart-felt giving in their receiving. Wouldn't life be so much more beautiful?

Well, thankfully, many of us can say that gift-giving and gift-receiving is something we have experienced many times. And thankfully, many of us can say that gratitude is something we have expressed from our hearts to others because we have genuinely felt blessed by what we have been given from them. Imagine if more and more of our lives, our interactions and the giving and receiving in our relationships can become gift-gratitude exchanges. Imagine how we may influence the world for good as the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in our world. And imagine how much more healing and wholeness we may experience in our own lives when such gift-gratitude exchange is a growing reality in our living and loving. Imagine!... Amen.

Prayer: Thank you, O God... we genuinely want to express this to you: thank you... Teach us to savour all we have and all we are given as gift... Help us to be generous with our judgements and our blessings knowing others have challenges we can never fully comprehend... May we be gracious... May we offer the gift of caring compassion... May we offer gratitude to others generously and may thanksgiving truly live in our hearts... Amen.