

THE POWER OF GRATITUDE

Luke 17: 11-19; Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

A few years ago 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? Why is it something we have to be disciplined about? Gratitude should be natural and easy for us. But it's not. Why?

There are two kinds of reasons why we have trouble being thankful and expressing gratitude regularly... two kinds of reasons. And to find out what these reasons are, let us look more closely at our scripture readings.

First, our gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is approached by ten lepers. Now leprosy was not only a disease disgusting to behold. Many people also believed it was contagious. This was a convenient belief because it meant you didn't have to get too close to lepers. The disease made people smell bad. It caused people's flesh to rot. It was repulsive. Not knowing the cause of it made people afraid of it. Many people dealt with that by blaming lepers themselves. 'They must have done something to contract the disease. It must be their lifestyle, their sins, something about them that made them cursed.' And because it was contagious you could justify staying away from lepers without feeling guilty for your lack of compassion and unwillingness to befriend and comfort them.

Isn't this still the case today? Whether it's dementia, cancer, heart disease or every case of Covid-19, we always wonder whether the person has done something to contribute to their disease or maybe it's something in the genes of their parents and grandparents. Something or someone has to be blamed. We need to have some knowledge as to why so that we can feel more control over things that scare us. So we come up with theories and justifications and all of it can be very uncaring and dismissive. The truth is that so many terrible things can happen to any one of us at any time and there's often no rhyme or reason to it. We are vulnerable. We're not in control all too often. How do we deal with our fear? Do we move in the way of compassion or to we blame? Do we reach out with care or concern or shut ourselves off from the vulnerability we share with others?

Jesus moves in the way of compassion, incredibly so. He allows the lepers to approach him. He pays attention to them. His love sends healing rays toward them. He tells them to go show themselves to the priests. Priests had the authority to declare someone healed and clean, like a public health officer. Once declared clean they could return to their families, to society and to normal life again. Whatever damage the disease will have done would be stopped. Life could be good again.

So, doesn't it make sense that all ten lepers would return to thank Jesus? Of course it would. But incredibly, sadly, shockingly, only one returns. And the one who returns isn't even a fellow Jew like Jesus. He's a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans are enemies. Leprosy may have brought him together with the other nine, but now that they're healed, they part ways. This Samaritan, though, hasn't forgotten what Jesus has done for him. He has given him back his life. He will never forget that. He comes back, prostrates himself at Jesus feet and thanks him profusely.

Jesus is as shocked as we are. "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? None was found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Well it is a surprise and it isn't a surprise. Just like the story I started the sermon with, often people who are outsiders appreciate things in a way that insiders never do. Why? We begin to take things for granted. We develop feelings of entitlement. "It's my right! You owe me. I've earned it. I deserve it. Why should I be thankful for something that should be mine anyway?"

So here we have one of the big obstacles to gratitude – entitlement and the feeling that we have earned, deserved and it's our right to have everything we do. Not only is this an obstacle to gratitude, but it is an obstacle to relationships of mutual giving and sharing. Gratitude recognizes that people don't owe us what they give us. It's a gift. People don't have to care, and they don't have to serve, and they don't have to do what they do. The fact that we are born where we are born and given the opportunities we are given; the fact that

we are alive; the fact that we have the support and love and resources we do; all of it is a gift. Gratitude should be the beginning and the end of every day we are alive.

So why isn't it? Is entitlement and all those feelings that we are owed the only reason? No. There's another obstacle to gratitude that could be even more sinister and poisonous. This second obstacle to gratitude is there in the background of our gospel story, but it's also there in our second reading from Jeremiah.

The people of Israel have suffered terribly. They've been forced to move from their homeland and live in other places, foreign places. It's like refugees who are forced to flee to save themselves and their families because of war or hardship. Do they just settle down in temporary terms until there's an opportunity to return? How can they ever feel at home in a foreign place? But Jeremiah gives them a new word from God. "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare."

It was easy for Jews in exile to focus on all that was wrong with life and all that was wrong with the world. They could feel sorry for themselves and miserable. They could focus on the half of the glass that was empty and totally miss the possibilities available to them. They could be stuck in their complaints, their needs, their blaming, and their resistance to making a positive go of it by building positive new relationships. And this, my friends, is the second and even, at times, more sinister obstacle to gratitude: self-pity and resentment. We can get so stuck with everything that's wrong from our point of view, that we shut ourselves off from the many ways we can be part of a journey of making things right for ourselves and others.

Gratitude undermines entitlement and the presumption that we are owed. Gratitude undermines the self-pity and resentment we can get stuck in. Gratitude opens up faith and hope in us so that we see possibility and opportunity everywhere. Gratitude opens us up to be compassionate toward others because we can focus on them. And in this reaching out in compassion we can find fulfillment and joy for ourselves. Gratitude opens us up to be generous and open to others, to build positive relationships and friendships. We appreciate other people instead of taking them for granted. We receive from them as much as we give to them and we are happy to say thank you over and over again, experiencing what we receive as a gift.

So why is gratitude a challenge for us at times? Are we prone to the sin of entitlement, that we are somehow owed, that it is our right? Are we prone to the sin of self-pity or resentment, where we are stuck in everything that's wrong, so much so that we cannot open ourselves to experience everything that can be right? We need to pray hard for God's gracious love to open our hearts to gratitude daily, lest we live out our lives with shrunken souls and miserable hearts and miss out on all that's possible.

Gratitude is a state of heart and mind. The more dependent it is on what happens to us on the outside, the less it will be something solid that lives in us regardless of what happens on the outside. Ten lepers are made clean but only one returns to say thank you. All ten lepers experienced healing on the outside, but only one leper had gratitude rise up and live in his heart. The people of Jeremiah's prophecy have been forced into exile, living in a foreign land. Will they find a way to embrace the life they now have and make the best of it? Will they find their way to gratitude or will they fall into a pit of self-pity and resentment?

What about you and me?

Let us pray: Find us wherever we are, O God... find us in our false sense of entitlement... find us in our self-pity, our resentment or even our envy of others and how much better they have it than we... Change our hearts... inspire our minds... fill us with fresh gratitude so that we can bless the world and be blessed anew ourselves... Amen.