

Entitled Spirituality and a Spirituality of Gratitude

Like 17: 11-19

In this familiar story of the healing of the ten lepers we see a great spiritual divide: entitled spirituality and a spirituality of gratitude. Is God a “deal-making God” or a mercy-giving God? Do we have a transactional relationship with God or a relationship based on grace? This story leads us to ponder this basic orientation of life: gratitude or entitlement?

No one admits to being entitled. But can the spirit of entitlement creep in without our noticing it? Can it be more a part of our relationship with God than we know?

I

In an old *Peanuts* cartoon, Charlie Brown’s little sister Sally is writing a letter to Santa Claus. Charlie Brown comes into the room. Here is the dialogue:

Charlie Brown: Are you sending those greedy letters to Santa again?

Sally: I’m not greedy. All I want is what I have coming to me. All I want is my fair share.

Charlie Brown: Santa Claus doesn’t owe you anything!

Sally: He does if I've been good. That's the agreement. Any 10th grade student of commercial law knows that!

Charles Shultz knows our human frame. Sally is us!

Some have this kind of relationship with God. It's a contract. I do something for God; God does something for me. If I am good, God will reward me. That's how it works: blessings, good fortune, health, prosperity, salvation. If I do my part, God will do God's part.

Religion becomes the game show: "Let's Make A Deal!"

You may have seen the movie years ago *Amadeus*. It's based on Peter Shaffer's play by that name. It's about Mozart and a composer of his time, Salieri. Salieri has a *mercantile* relationship with God: If I work hard and do my part, God will reward me. Here is his prayer to God—or his deal with God:

Signore (Lord), let me be a composer! Grant me sufficient fame to enjoy it.

In return I will live with virtue. I will strive to better the lot of my fellows.

And I will honor you with my music all the days of my life!¹

I may have prayed some prayers like that as a young preacher-to-be!

Salieri worked hard and became a good composer—I have listened to some of his music. All seemed well with him until the day he heard the music of the

impudent young Mozart, who had a dirty mouth and seemed to have little reverence for God.

Hearing his music threw Salieri not only into a fit of envy but also into a spiritual crisis in his relationship with God. Here is Salieri addressing God again:

Tonight at an inn somewhere in the city stands a giggling child who can put on paper, without actually setting down his billiard cue, casual notes which turn my most considered ones into lifeless scratches....Why? What is my fault? *You know how hard I've worked!* Solely that in the end I might hear your voice! I know I do hear it—and it says only one name:

MOZART!...Spiteful, sniggering, conceited, infantine Mozart.²

He had made his contract with God. Now he thinks God has reneged on the deal. And he is filled with corrosive, murderous envy.

II

Now let's go to the gospel story in Luke. Jesus is traveling the region between Samaria and Galilee on the way to Jerusalem. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews for their religious errors and their racial impurity. Jesus, then and now, crosses boundaries to bring the grace of God to all.

Jesus also traverses the geography of the soul: between a spirituality that thinks because it has followed all the rules, God owes us some return and a

spirituality that lives by the mercy of God and knows it's all grace. It is a difference that cuts across all religions and through every human soul.

As Jesus crosses over the border he meets 10 lepers. They live in a spiritual and social no-man's land. They were all alone, separated from society. Considered unclean, impure, they had to keep a distance from all others—as they did when Jesus approached.

They cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on me!” We may not have used those words, but we have felt that way: “Help God!” A woman passed the minister in the narthex after worship. He asked how she was. She said, “Pastor, I’m somewhere between “Lord have mercy”, and “Thank you Jesus”. Somedays we are much closer to “Lord have mercy!”

III

Jesus gave them a short command: “Go, show yourselves to the priest.” It was part of what lepers did in that day when they were healed: They went to the priest to have their healing confirmed. Then and only then could they re-enter society.

They looked down, their skin still had spots. They weren't healed yet. But hearing Jesus' command they went anyway. Sometimes that's how faith begins: in the simple act of hearing and doing.

Sometimes faith begins in a leap of faith. And the leap is not a leap of believing, but a leap of *doing*, a leap of action.

And the text says, “*As they went*, they were healed.” That’s the way it happens sometimes. We begin the journey toward healing and wholeness before it happens to us, then, as we go we experience healing and wholeness.

IV

Now comes the turn in the story, and why we remember it today. One of them, when he saw he was healed started praising God, then he turned back and falling at Jesus’ feet began thanking and thanking him. Luke adds parenthetically, but not so parenthetically: “Now he was a Samaritan.” We might at first have ignored it.

Then Jesus put a question out into the air, a rhetorical question, one that we are trying to answer today, 2,000 years later. It hangs in the air for us to ponder:

Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this one *foreigner*?

What was it about the person being a Samaritan and a foreigner that made him more open to praise and gratitude? We need not make the other nine villains in order to make the Samaritan a hero. We don’t know their stories.

But it leads us to ponder the difference between entitlement spirituality and a spirituality of gratitude, between those who have a contract kind of relationship with God, and those who know without God and the mercy of God they don't have a chance.

Frederick Buechner writes about his experience in the recovery movement and his experience in church. He says that the most church he's experienced has not been upstairs in the sanctuaries, but down in the basements where 12-step meetings happen.

I've experienced what he's talking about. AA and 12-step meetings that are so full of gratitude and humility and laughter. They know that without the grace of God they are goners. Now grace has come.

There have been some in my churches who didn't like to sing *Amazing Grace* because of the word "wretch".

Amazing grace how sweet the sound.

That saved a wretch like me!

Here's our new more sophisticated version:

Amazing grace how sweet the sound

That saved a reasonably nice person like me!

Some have a contract relationship to God. I follow the rules, obey the commands of God. I've done my part. Mercantile religion.

But others, like this Samaritan are flabbergasted by mercy they never expected. Knocked silly by grace, and now praise fills their hearts—unabashed love and gratitude.

Maybe a spirituality of gratitude begins by getting in touch with the Samaritan part of ourselves. The part that feels unclean, like an outsider. The needy part of ourselves, the part we hide, the part that brings shame, the part that makes us feel like an imposter, or a failure, the part that for whatever reason feels like it doesn't belong.

And when grace comes along, praise happens, wonderment happens and gratitude floods your heart.

IV

The story ends as Jesus says to the leper: "Rise, get up off your knees, and go your way. Your faith has made you whole!" Cured you, made you well, made you whole, saved you. All the same word.

Even when we're not sick we yearn to be whole. Wholeness is what God's salvation brings.

Thomas Merton writes in a poem:

There is in all living things...

a hidden wholeness

And in you too, a hidden wholeness. Jesus comes to get us in touch with that.

What if life itself is a miracle, and every bloom of love?

So today, to use the words of the black church, “Let’s get our *praise on!*”

And a little gratitude as well.

Late night T.V. host Stephen Colbert, a dedicated Catholic, was asked in an interview about his faith. “Why is your faith so important to you?”, he was asked. And he replied, “It gives me somewhere to place my gratitude.”

1. Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus* (New York: Harper&Row, 1980), 8.

2. Ibid.,47

Benediction, Brother David Steindle-Rast:

“Love wholeheartedly, be surprised, give thanks and praise—then you will discover the fulness of your life.”