

## THANKFUL? OR GRATEFUL?

(11/26/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 103  
Luke 17:11-19

*“Then Jesus asked, ‘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?’” (Luke 17:17-18)*

Approximately 2,500 years ago, a wise man named Confucius made an interesting comment on the difference between God and human beings when he said, "God gives and forgives; we get and forget." This comment or commentary strikes me as appropriate for our reflections on this Thanksgiving weekend as we reflect on what we receive from God and on our response or lack of response to this gift.

The classic expression of grateful response is found in the 103rd psalm. The psalmist calls for a response from the deepest part of himself: his soul and all that is within him. This psalm was prayed as a total response to God.

From this psalm, and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we can see that the Hebrews were grateful to God for the blessings that are common to us all: life itself, the sun, the stars, the rain. They were also grateful for the blessings of their own religious tradition--their experience of God and how it shaped them individually and collectively. They thanked God for their miraculous exodus from slavery in Egypt, for the manna that God provided in the wilderness, for the emergence of religious leaders like Moses and Aaron in their time of need. In their psalms of thanksgiving, they witness to a God of history, a God whom they believed was deeply involved in their emerging identity as individuals, as a nation, and as a religion.

The psalmist tells us that the soul's grateful response to God is not primarily for the blessings of material possessions. He tells us that God is the one:

*who forgives all your sins,  
who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
who satisfies you with good as long as you live,  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

The Hebrews' covenant with God was not only social, not only between God and Israel; it was first and foremost personal. We believe that, through Jesus, God has renewed this covenant with us as individuals and as a church. God gives us all the psalmist mentions and more! All God asks of us is our response.

The gospel lesson this morning contains an account of one of Jesus' miraculous healings. Perhaps because Luke was a physician, the healing miracles were a common theme in his gospel's description of Jesus. Luke shows us in many different ways how the experience of healing is dependent upon our relationship with God.

The miracle we heard this morning, the healing of the ten lepers, is powerful in its simplicity. It is powerful not only in the healing, but also in the conclusion to the story where the focus shifts to the matter of response. Of the ten who were miraculously healed of this dreaded disease, only one returned to Jesus to say thank you.

Let's begin by trying to understand the disease from which these individuals suffered, that we might better understand what it meant for them to be healed. The medical name for leprosy is Hansen's Disease. It is a chronic disease, often very painful, caused by a bacterium which is closely related to the bacteria which causes tuberculosis. Leprosy affects not only the skin, but the entire nervous system, especially the nervous system of the extremities, causing cruel deformities of the arms and legs.

If the leprosy primarily affects the skin, the person will be afflicted with thick, knobby growths which will distort his/her features. If it strikes the nervous system, fingers and toes may lose all feeling. For a long time, it was assumed that these afflicted fingers and toes eventually shriveled and fell off. A recent investigator in one of the poverty pockets of the world where leprosy still exists has found that far more commonly, the fingers and toes are eaten by rats during the night, with the person not even feeling enough pain to wake up. This is why the fingers and toes are not found in the morning.

We don't like to hear about diseases like leprosy. We would rather assume that it falls into the category of those ancient diseases that have been eliminated by hygiene and modern scientific medicine. Perhaps we should take a moment to think about leprosy, to reflect upon the suffering it has caused throughout the ages and still causes today, as we seek to remember in this Thanksgiving season how truly fortunate we are. By recent estimates, twelve million people suffer from Hansen's Disease, in our world today. Most of them live in the underprivileged countries of the world, in those tropical or subtropical regions that lag far behind the northern industrialized areas. Leprosy also occurs in Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and even southern United States. One of the Hawaiian Islands contains a leper colony.

In biblical times, it was assumed that leprosy was highly contagious. Lepers were isolated from society. They were required to announce their presence by calling out, "Unclean! Unclean!" if anyone approached. This social isolation, with the stigma it bore, compounded the

suffering of these unfortunate people. We also need to remember that in Old Testament times, disease of any kind was seen as a punishment for sin. So, these individuals, probably millions of them, suffered not only from the disease and from the rejection of their society, but also from the belief that they had committed some unpardonable sin and had been rejected by God. I'm sure they must have struggled with the question of what they had done wrong, what sin they had committed to deserve such a punishment.

Today we know that leprosy is not as contagious as was originally thought, or that it may be contagious only to a few people who, for some reason, are highly susceptible. There are examples of husbands or wives living with their leprosy-stricken spouse for thirty, forty, fifty years and never contracting the disease. There are also moving stories of doctors and nurses who have devoted their lives to the care of these suffering souls upon whom society has turned its back.

The first part of our gospel lesson is about healing. It reminds us that healing is miraculous, and that healing comes from God. Physicians and scientists have known this from ancient times, though some in our time tend to forget it. A physician can set a broken bone or remove a damaged organ, but the little cells that mend the broken tissue bridge the gap on their own. The cell is programmed for healing not by the physician or the medicine, but by God. We can help a sick person establish the best conditions possible for recuperation, but it is up to those little white cells to destroy the foreign invaders or establish a healthy balance once again within the system. Healing is built into the structure of existence, from the smallest cell to the largest, most complex organism.

We sometimes take healing for granted. If we have experienced a miraculous healing in our life or in the life of someone close to us, we may feel a profound sense of gratitude to God. In situations where someone is healed against all odds, we have a sense of God's presence, God's healing power within the depths of that person and in all people. If we or someone we loved were cured of leprosy, we would of course be grateful. But what about the other healings, the "ordinary" healings, if any healing can be described as ordinary? What about the thousands, if not millions, of daily healings which take place within our body? Where is the sense of gratitude for these?

*Ten were miraculously healed. Only one returned to say thank you.*

God's healing power is present not only in the physical dimension of life; God is also present in the emotional and spiritual dimension of life. God is present in our relationships. There is a center that gives rise not only to healing, but also to growth within the depths of our soul. This center seeks to help us unfold our life in all fullness and wholeness. It has the power

to heal, to help us recover from traumas, from emotional and spiritual crises as well as physical injury or disease time and time again.

In the emotional and spiritual realm, we sometimes take this healing for granted. When we are moved by a profound religious experience, or when we experience a deep sense of meaning in our life, we acknowledge God's presence and are filled with gratitude. But what about the other moments, the "ordinary" moments, if any moments can be described as ordinary? What about the thousands, if not millions, of daily moments within our psychological life, our spiritual life, our relationships? Where is the sense of gratitude for these?

*Ten were miraculously healed. Only one returned to say thank you.*

Perhaps Confucius is right. Whereas God constantly gives and forgives, we humans tend to get and forget. When we forget the One who is the source of all healing, we confine or restrict our awareness of God's activity, God's sphere of influence, to a very small area of our life. We recognize and celebrate God's presence in those unusual and exceptional experiences that play a major, life-transforming role--like witnessing someone being cured of an incurable illness by prayer, or in religious experiences like Saul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, but we fail to recognize God's presence as an integral part of our everyday life.

By not seeing God in the small moments, in those beautiful feelings we experience throughout the day, in our dreams (which the ancients believed were revelations from God), in the depths of every person and every relationship, we do not limit God's actual presence in our life, but we do limit *our awareness of that presence*. This limited awareness shapes our attitude, diminishes our faith, and leads us further and further from God. We need to remember that our faith stance, our response, shapes our relationship with God and, consequently, the resources God offers us for the living of our life.

God is present within you as a resource for the living of your life. God is there to help you with that wound, that crisis, that lonely struggle, that difficult decision which is known to you alone. God is present within you not only to help you make that difficult decision, but also to strengthen you as you seek to live it out, to help you carry that difficult burden from day to day. God's accepting, forgiving love is present as a reality within your soul to forgive you for those misguided thoughts, feelings, and choices, to forgive you and guide you back to the path as often as you go astray. It is a gracious, giving God who dwells within you and within our community. It is, as Confucius said, a God who gives and forgives. Far too often, however, as the recipients of God's gifts, we get and forget. We forget to say thank you.

Notice how, once again, Jesus dissolves the barriers that separate two tribes, two peoples: the Israelites and the Samaritans. He undermines the Israelite's belief that they are special to God, that they are God's chosen, that only they are saved. Once again Jesus attacks the tribalism that was a problem in his day and is a serious problem in ours as well. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan is more of a follower of the Way than the Hebrew priest or Levite—simply because he was moved and his actions were motivated by a spirit of generosity, of compassion, of charity, of hospitality. The tenth leper in this morning's lesson is special not because he belonged to the right ethnic group, the right religious group, or because he held an orthodox system of beliefs. He is saved, healed inwardly as well as outwardly because of his response—a response of deep gratitude.

The response of the ten lepers demonstrates the difference between an attitude of thankfulness and an attitude of gratitude. I believe gratitude is a deeper spiritual response than thankfulness. We can be thankful in a general way for the parts of our life that go well. Many people who have no belief in God, no awareness of God's presence in their life, are thankful, e.g., they may be thankful they weren't audited by the IRS because they have been cheating on their taxes! Gratitude is a more personal response; it directs us to a person—or to a personal God. We can be thankful for our good luck in life, thankful in a way that leaves God out of the equation. If we are grateful, we focus on the person or the spirit who is responsible for our healing.

Perhaps this is the distinction we should make with regard to the ten lepers. Nine of the lepers were probably thankful they were healed. I can't believe they weren't happy it had happened! However, only one was grateful. Only one recognized Jesus as the source of his healing. Only one returned to express his gratitude to the person who had worked this miracle in his life. When our heart, our mind, and our lips choose the personal rather than the impersonal response to life's blessings, we deepen our relationship with God.

We should not just be thankful for our many blessings in this Thanksgiving season. We should be grateful to that God who is the creator, sustainer, and guide of our life and of all life. Our response should draw us closer to that God. As Dag Hammarskjöld has said,

*God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.*

There are dimensions of life that open to us when we are consciously grateful. God is always there—loving, giving, and forgiving, but our response is important, we who get and forget. If we take life for granted, if we feel life owes us a living, we will feel angry when things don't go our way. We will become shallow, superficial, childish, demanding, and generally very unhappy. If we view life as a gift, if we take each day as it comes, count each day as a blessing, give thanks

for the opportunity to work, to love, to grow, even to suffer; if we feel we owe something to God for this great gift, we will experience a depth of happiness beyond description.

Hugh Evans, writing some time ago for Billy Graham's newsletter, shared the following thought:

*Gratitude is a way of looking at life, and it brings its blessing even though life may be difficult. If Jesus could experience and express gratitude in spite of all the painful moments of his life, you and I should find many reasons to be grateful in the commonplace routine of our daily lives. If we are grateful for the moments, for the experiences that shape us, we shall find ourselves strengthened in spirit to meet the pressing problems of our lives. Today my step will be a little lighter because I have said in my heart, "My God, I thank you for this day, whatever it brings."*

*Ten lepers were healed by the miraculous power of God. Nine lepers were thankful. Only one was grateful. Only one returned to say thank you.*

We are healed and strengthened and guided by the miraculous power of God in so many ways every day. In this Thanksgiving season, we pause to reflect upon our many blessings. But are we similar to the nine lepers, or are we similar to the one? Are we thankful for our blessings, or are we truly grateful? How often do we feel that deep sense of gratitude to God for the Holy Spirit's guiding, healing presence in our life that the tenth leper felt?

How often do we return to the source of our healing, bow our heads in prayer, and say thank you?

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
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## **OUR RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP**

In this Thanksgiving season, we become aware of all our many blessings. Not a day should go by when we do not give thanks for all we have in this great country, a country that is not without its problems, but which is still a wonderful place to live. We give thanks for enjoying a standard of living that is the envy of 95% of the world's people. We give thanks for the level of medical care that we (or at least most of our citizens) enjoy. As we know, we have a way to go in making sure that the blessings we enjoy are available to all, but at least we are members of a community of faith that is dedicated to making this happen, to bringing about God's kingdom on earth for all our brothers and sisters.

It is when we realize that all we have and all we are not only comes from God, but may actually *be* God, be an incarnation of God's loving, creative Spirit in the world of space and time, that we experience a sense of deep connectedness with God, a deep connectedness with God and all of creation that awakens a feeling of humility within us, that gives rise to a feeling of deep gratitude.

Out of this sense of deep gratitude, we seek new ways to be of service in God's ongoing creation of life. We seek new ways to share our gifts. Each of us has something that we can share with this church and with the world. The good deeds, the good works that are so characteristic of our church do not arise out of a vacuum; they are the outward expression of a deep and meaningful Christian faith.

It is in this spirit that we consecrate our lives and the gifts that we offer to our church this morning in support of its many ministries to our church family, to our community, and to the world.