

“Whole and Grateful”

Luke 17:11-19

4/17/16

Writer and pastor, Gordon MacDonald, tells of a time when he took his 3 year-old grandson to Chuck E. Cheese for pizza and noisy games. When the evening ended, Grandma said, “Now be sure you say “thank you” to your Grandpa.” No response.

She tried again. “Didn’t you hear me? Be sure you say ‘thank you’ to your Grandpa for taking you to Chuck E. Cheese.” Silence.

Grandpa decided to enter the conversation. “You know that your Grandpa enjoys doing nice things for grandchildren, especially when they say thanks.” Nothing.

By now Grandpa was getting irritated. “Did you hear me?” he asked.

“Uh huh.” But still no thank you.

Grandpa’s volume level was rising. “Are you ignoring me?” he asked.

After a long pause, a little voice replied, “I’m thankful, Grandpa; I just don’t want to say it.”

Ingratitude, and a failure to express our gratitude starts early, doesn’t it? And yet, many people believe that gratitude is the foundational virtue for Christian spirituality, and for a happy life! How do we learn this important virtue?

In this morning's story from Luke 17, we find, among other things, Jesus' thoughts about gratitude and its importance.

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:11-19)

Let's walk our way through the story to be sure we understand exactly what's going on. Then we'll focus little on the issue of gratitude. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where betrayal, abandonment, and the cross await him. And he knows it. He has made it as far as the edge of Galilee, his home region, where it borders Samaria. There, he encounters 10 men who have leprosy. Leprosy was and is a horrible disease. It is caused by a bacterium and results in open sores and the loss of feeling. Over time it becomes horribly disfiguring and can even result in the loss of

fingers, toes, or facial parts. It can be treated today with antibiotics, but in ancient times it was a slow lonely death sentence, and greatly feared. The Old Testament specified that anyone with the disease had to be segregated from the rest of the community. Out of fear of contagion, lepers were forced to live outside of their towns, and were forbidden any close contact with other people. They were also regarded as religiously “unclean” and could not take part in religious observances, either. They were social outcasts, avoided by everyone.

Outside of the town Jesus is entering, he encounters 10 lepers. They were probably begging, since there was no way they could work. They keep their distance from Jesus as required by the law, shouting to him across the way. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” They have clearly heard the rumors that this itinerant rabbi has the gift of healing, and that he has even healed other lepers. They’ve got nothing to lose, so they beg Jesus to have pity on them.

Jesus’ response to them is interesting. In other cases of healing lepers, Jesus touches them and heals them that way. But not this time. This time he tells them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” That seems odd, doesn’t it? Are they going for confession or baptism or to hear a sermon or something? No. The Old Testament Law specified that if anyone ever claimed to be healed of leprosy, the priest would act as a kind

of public health inspector. Only he could declare that the person was indeed healed of their disease, thus allowing them to return to the community. To be with their families. To be touched by others. To work. To worship with their friends. Jesus is anticipating their healing in directing them to go to the priests.

And as they go, which was an act of faith on their part, they are healed. Now it's hard for us to imagine the impact this would have had on them. Not only were they delivered from a horrifying and terminal illness; their entire lives were changed! And one of them immediately returns to Jesus, praising God in a loud voice for his healing, and bowing low before Jesus in humble appreciation. And, Luke tells us, he was a Samaritan. What's the significance of that?

Centuries before, some Jews in Samaria intermarried with Gentiles in that land, something strictly forbidden by Jewish law. And, over time they came to believe that they were the true bearers of the religion of Abraham, insisting that their temple and scriptures were the true ones. Periodically, war broke out between these two peoples, with both sides accusing the other of various atrocities. By the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans hated one another and had as little to do with each other as possible. So, it would have been jarring for people to hear Jesus commending a Samaritan! But he does. This Samaritan leper, who had two social strikes

against him (being both a Samaritan and a leper), gets it right here by showing gratitude for his healing.

So, clearly Jesus saw gratitude as important. As I said before, gratitude is an important Christian virtue. It requires humility, acknowledging that all that we have is a gift from God. In spite of the American myth of self-sufficiency- that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps- we are never in fact self-sufficient, but are always dependent on the good gifts of our Creator. It is important for us to acknowledge that reality.

Now most of us agree that gratitude is important. No one likes to see a spoiled, ungrateful child, or a spoiled, ungrateful adult! But in a society in which a sense of entitlement seems to be spreading, gratitude is becoming less common. Writer John Ortberg points out that the San Francisco Giants were once sued for passing out Father's Day gifts because the team gave them only to men! And a psychic was awarded \$986,000 when a CAT scan allegedly impaired her psychic abilities. You have to wonder about that last one. If she were such a great psychic, wouldn't she have known... not to get the scan done in the first place?

The point is that a sense of entitlement, coupled with our flawed human nature, means that gratitude doesn't come naturally to us. When I recently spoke on this passage at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes

meeting at the college, one of the students noted her astonishment that so many students lack gratitude for the good things in their lives. She said that her parents had always been careful to teach her and her sister the importance of being thankful for all the good things in their lives, so it just comes naturally to them now.

So, parents, be encouraged: You can teach your children to be grateful people, both by your example and with your instruction. Please do so!

But, what if our parents didn't teach us to be grateful? Or, maybe you resisted their teaching about gratitude, like the grandson in our earlier story. Here's the truth: None of us have to be stuck with ingratitude and a false sense of self-sufficiency. That's the good news of the gospel, that our very hearts can change! But, how?

There are some spiritual practices that can help you to be genuinely grateful. John Kralik wrote a book entitled, "365 Thank-yous: The Year a Simple Act of Daily Gratitude Changed My Life." Here's the introduction: "One recent December, at age 53, John Kralik found his life at a terrible, frightening low: his small law firm was failing; he was struggling through a painful second divorce; he had grown distant from his two older children and was afraid he might lose contact with his young daughter; he was living in a tiny apartment where he froze in the winter and baked in the summer;

he was 40 pounds overweight; his girlfriend had just broken up with him; and overall, his dearest life dreams--including hopes of upholding idealistic legal principles and of becoming a judge--seemed to have slipped beyond his reach.” You get the idea. His life was an absolute wreck. But one day he received a simple thank you note from a former girlfriend that really touched him, and he wondered if he could learn to be a more grateful person in spite of his difficulties. Spoiler alert: He did!

The simple practice of writing one thank-you note to someone each day, helped him to learn gratitude. And there are other practices you could try. A few years ago, my wife, Bonnie, began writing a list of things she was thankful for each morning. She now has recorded over 7000 things for which she is thankful! (I’m sure many of them are about me, but I haven’t had the courage to ask!) Could you do something like that? Or, maybe you could decide to include a time of thanking God each time you pray, rather than jumping into everything you want God to do for you. In time, these kinds of disciplines can begin to change your heart and attitude, helping you to fulfill all those biblical commands to give thanks to God, helping you to become a person for whom being grateful comes naturally.

In a few minutes, we’re going to enter a time of prayer, asking God for healing and wholeness in our lives. In the story we just read, Jesus provided both physical and social healing to the 10 lepers, an astounding

miracle that changed their lives forever. Could it happen this morning? A few weeks ago we celebrated Easter, shouting aloud our belief that Jesus rose from the dead and is alive today! A living Savior is still able to heal us, and he has done so for many of you already. And, if you aren't coming forward for prayer this morning, use the time to give thanks to God for his many good gifts to you.