

GRATITUDE – LUKE 17:11-19

“The Process, Promise and Power of Gratitude”

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Last week, Pastor Doug talked about Personal Thanksgiving and this week as we celebrate this first week in Advent I'm going to be sharing a little bit more on the subject of gratitude.

Advent is a time of waiting and hoping, and then Christ comes and life is changed.

Our sermon Scripture is the story of ten lepers, who were in a time of waiting and hoping, and then Christ came and while their lives were changed only one experienced the power of gratitude.

I was driving back from the base last month thinking about the upcoming holiday, and a series of emotions washed over me from excitement that the girls would be home, sadness because my mom is gone and then a rush of gratitude for my parents and the life they gave me.

I thought about how hard it must have been for them to adopt an older child and how brave they were to go to an orphanage and pick out a child to take home.

I know that bringing me home at the age of eleven couldn't have been easy. When I got home from drill, I wrote my dad a thank you letter telling him again how grateful I am that they adopted me and literally saved my life.

I felt really good in this wake of gratitude and it reminded me that gratitude is more than good manners, it's more than just something we "should do," it has the potential to be life changing.

And yet, even in the midst of tremendous circumstances when you would think gratitude would come easy, it can be lost.

My husband, who's from Wisconsin, grew up with the story of the Lady Elgin.

On September 8, 1860 the Wisconsin Steamer, The Lady Elgin sank.

She was on her way back to Milwaukee from a rally in Chicago when tragedy struck.

Around 11:30pm she cleared the Chicago Harbor and headed out into the open lake with 600-700 people on board.

At 2:30 AM the Elgin was about seven miles off shore when a tremendous jar knocked the ship's side. Because of sudden gale force winds, she was hit by the Augusta, a 129 ft., schooner bound for Chicago with a deck load of lumber.

Within 20 minutes, most of the Lady Elgin had gone to the bottom. She sank during a thunder and lightning storm.

Survivors clung to anything that would float but as they got closer to shore they were crushed by the powerful mass of surf, undertow and debris.

By 8:00a.m. several students from Northwestern University were on the scene as the wreckage approached the shore.

Perhaps as many as 400 survivors reached the shallows, but only 160 were saved, the remainder drowning in the pounding surf and rubble.

There were numerous acts of heroism and perhaps the best known is that of Edward Spencer who was attending the Garrett Biblical Institute on the campus of Northwestern University in preparation for ministry.

He is said to have repeatedly charged back into the boiling surf to rescue people despite numerous injuries from floating wreckage. 16 times over a 6 hour period, he dove into the surf and the waves.

In all he is credited with saving 17 people after which he collapsed in a state of delirium, repeatedly asking "Did I do my best?"

While he didn't lose his life that day, his injuries were significant and he lost the life he was planning on living.

He spent the rest of his days in a wheel chair and was unable to enter the ministry.

When he died, one notice of his death said that not one of the seventeen people he saved ever came back to thank him.¹

Have you ever experienced someone else's lack of gratitude? Given something to someone with no acknowledgement, done a job well that went unnoticed or helped someone who then ignored your gift?

Remember how that felt? It's not that you did it for the thanks, but the lack of appreciation can leave you wondering if what you did made any difference.

Other times, we're on the asking end. What is your biggest prayer, the thing you are most hoping for right now? Have you thought about what would happen if that prayer were suddenly answered, how would you express your gratitude?

In Jesus day, he ran into folks who were asking him for something all the time.

¹ Brandon Bailod, "The Wreck of the Steamer Lady Elgin," Great Lakes maritime Press, <http://www.shipwreck.com/shipwreck/projects/elgin>. Also. Matthew Leib. "The Story of Northwestern's First Varsity Sport," www.northbynorthwestern.com.

One day, as Jesus continued on toward Jerusalem, he reached the border between Galilee and Samaria. As he entered a village there, ten lepers stood at a distance, crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" He looked at them and said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed of their leprosy. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back to Jesus, shouting, "Praise God!" He fell to the ground at Jesus' feet, thanking him for what he had done. This man was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" And Jesus said to the man, "Stand up and go. Your faith has healed you."

Ten were in trouble. They had a disease that kept them from their families.

Being quarantined outside the community, who knows how long they had been away from home, from their spouses and children, from their work and their hobbies? How long had their lives been on hold?

They stood at a distance from God shouting for help.

Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priest, which is what they would have had to do according to the law to be allowed back into community, back into their homes and back into the synagogue.

I imagine, they all took off running to the priest and the story says that "as they went" they were healed, but only one stopped and returned to give thanks.

Then Jesus did something remarkable. He opens a window into the power of gratitude.

He told the man he could go on his way and that his faith has healed him. It's a little bit confusing because earlier in the story, it already said they were healed, so why did Jesus say he was healed again?

There's more to healing here than meets the eye. The others had received physical healing but the thankful one received more, he received spiritual healing as well.

The word healed here means saved. He was made whole as he experienced the grace of gratitude where faith and salvation merge.

Who knows what happened to these folks while they were sick with leprosy? after being outside community, had they grown bitter or angry because of their circumstances?

Had they gotten farther away from God thinking he didn't care about them? Long term suffering, long term worry and pain can take a toll not just on the afflicted, but on their family as well.

Gratitude generates grace, it brought saving grace that provided more than physical healing. Gratitude put him in a position to receive healing on the inside that allowed him to fully return to his life.

The others took off and kept going. They couldn't get home quick enough? What would you have done?

Joni Ericson Tada who lives as a quadriplegic, wrote in her book, "Heaven" that people often ask her what is the first thing she will do when she gets to heaven and can use her arms and legs again?

She says that the first thing she will do is to remain motionless in an offering of thanksgiving and praise.

She will spend her first moments not running as she might wish, but silent and still before her Lord in an expression of gratitude.

This man, cleansed of leprosy understood the Sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Jesus raises the question of why it was only the foreigner who came back to give thanks.

It's interesting since the Jewish people had strict protocol and guidelines on how to give thanks spelled out for them in the book of Leviticus (chapter 7).

Our gratitude matters to God, and we can grow in gratitude as we embrace the process, promise and power of gratitude.

Gratitude is powerful, even in the midst of the most desperate situations, it can be our salvation. It brings joy, makes us feel good; it promotes health, and reduces worry. Somebody once said, "If worrying were a paying job, some of us would be rich."

If you think about it, worry is usually about the future, while gratitude anchors us back to the present. Worry triggers fear, while gratitude triggers faith.

Having a gracious and grateful spirit makes us more fun to be around and draws people to us and connects us to the Holy Spirit and it's a pretty good cure for bitterness and resentment.

Our minds and our hearts cannot be occupied by both positive emotions of thankfulness and negative emotions such as anger or fear at the same time.

Author, Melody Beattie says, "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion to clarity..."

"It's like mental sunshine. It makes us feel good because it helps widen our frame of vision. Under depression or stress we can develop tunnel vision, seeing only this problem or that difficulty."²

Now, it's not like just waving a magic wand. There is a process for experiencing gratitude.

Part of that process includes getting past some obstacles like negative emotions such as anger, guilt, fear, frustration, resentment, shame, selfishness, greed and the sense of entitlement.

These are the kind of emotions that can hinder our ability to feel grateful.

However, the biggest obstacle we may face has to do with attitude.

Victor Frankl said, "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread.

They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing:

The last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

So, we start by taking a survey of our attitude and addressing anything that would hinder us.

Next in the process is to express our gratitude. God wants to hear thank you from us, and the more we express it, the more we become aware of it and the more we become aware of it, the more we will experience it. It's a nice cycle.

Start with where we are, saying thank you for all the little things around us, clean water, fresh air, beautiful sky.

My husband's favorite line, "Focus on what you have, not on what you don't have."

Someone said, "If you haven't got all the things you want, be grateful for the things you don't have that you don't want."

² M.J. Ryan. "Attitudes of Gratitude. How to Give and Receive Joy Every Day of Your Life. Conari Press. 1999. pg18.

Then, avoid comparisons. Be grateful for who you are and celebrate your uniqueness and what God is doing with you and in your life.

We can't compare ourselves to anyone else, or our stuff to their stuff and think we will be happy.

That only increases want, desire and dissatisfaction.

Sometimes we can't see the good in our life because we're upset that it didn't turn out the way we wanted it to.

C.S. Lewis said we have to examine our expectations. He said, "It seems to me that we often, almost sulkily, reject the good that God offers us because, at the moment, we expect some other good."

Gratitude is a gift of grace that can help get us through difficult circumstances:

Last Sunday we closed the 11:30 service singing a hymn written by Martin Rinkart who was a seventeenth-century Lutheran pastor, serving in his German hometown of Eilenberg during the height of the Thirty Years War.

Being a walled city, Eilenberg soon found itself overrun with refugees and injured troops, inviting not only fear and overcrowding, but a deadly wave of disease and pestilence.

Armies continued to march around its tight borders, besieging them of food and provisions, leaving the people in hunger and want.

The Rinkart home became a refuge of sorts for many of the sick and stranded. Though there was hardly enough for Martin to feed his own family, he ministered tirelessly to the endless needs of others around him, trying to match gaping need with God's care and compassion.

When other pastors fled for safety, Martin stayed on, eventually conducting more than 4,500 funeral services that year

One of them was his wife. And yet at some point in the midst of such dire, disheartening circumstances, he composed a family grace to be said by his children before meals that says,

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices. Who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices. Who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.³

³ Nancy Leigh DeMoss. "Choosing Gratitude." Moody Publishers, Chicago. 2009. pp 132-133.

One of the things I noticed in his prayer is that he recalled good things from the past and counted them as current blessings.

So next in the process is to remember the past. By looking back at things we are grateful for, we are reminded of God's presence in our lives and that gives us hope for the future.

Finally, Gratitude includes praise: As the healed man thanked God, it says, he praised him. There is that moment when we praise that helps us move from whining to worship.

Praise helps reestablishes our relationship with God on its proper terms. It allows God's goodness to restore balance.

The fortunate thing about praise is that it's easy to do, we can do it silently while we're on a walk, in the car, eating lunch or whatever.

We can listen to a hymn or praise song anywhere these days with our Ipods.

Prayer and worship has a way of soothing, and encouraging us.

The late Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand, founder of the Voice of the Martyrs, spent fourteen years in prison for preaching the gospel.

Although his captors smashed four of his vertebrae and either cut or burned eighteen holes in his body, they could not defeat his will and his spirit. "Alone in my cell," he testified, "cold, hungry, and in rags, I danced for joy every night."⁴

May you know this same joy, may you dance with gratitude (even if only in your heart) before the Lord at least once a day and may you feel the freedom and relief gratitude brings.

May you experience the peace of a thankful heart and may you, even during times of waiting, seize every opportunity to receive the life changing power and salvation available through the grace of gratitude.

LETS PRAY:

Dear Lord, thank you for the Bible, for your words and stories to give us insight into your will for us. Thank you for the Holy Spirit who helps us understand your words of encouragement and hope. Thank you for all that you've given us, all the opportunities we've had through the years, for the people in our lives who love us, for your storehouse of supplies that never runs low, for your whispers of love and strong hand of protection,

⁴ Richard Wurmbrand. "In God's Underground" (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1968, 2004), pg 56. And Nancy Leigh DeMoss. "Choosing Gratitude." Moody Publishers, Chicago. 2009. pg 127.

for the wisdom you willingly grant to all who ask, and your welcoming invitation to those who seek you. Thank you for waiting with us in our times of trial and being there when we come with our problems and for filling us with peace and joy when we remember to say thank you. Help us to remember the process, promise and power that comes through the act of gratitude. Help us to experience the saving grace genuine gratitude gives and the explosive joy filled feeling of freedom that comes with the acceptance gratitude brings. Lord, you are good and although we don't always understand why you allow what you allow, or why you let things go on like they do even though we've prayed for a change, thank you for showing us that gratitude lets us experience a change on the inside even if nothing changes on the outside. Help us to remember to set time aside everyday to tell you thank you, to take that step of faith in all circumstances, at all times. In Jesus name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

Psalm 50:23 says, "Those who sacrifice thank offerings honors me, and they prepare the way so that I may show them the salvation of God." Therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise. Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, his love endures forever. Amen.