

18th Sunday after Pentecost

October 9, 2022

Luke 17:11-19

Pastor Ann Hultquist

Sometime before the pandemic, our Faith Community Nurse, Sue Ann, put a “Gratitude Jar” on the counter in the church office. Next to it she put slips of paper that said “Today I am grateful for _____” The jar is full these days; I don’t know if it’s been emptied in the intervening years, but I took a look at the anonymous slips the other day, and here’s some of what I found:

I am grateful for: my family; the alarm going off; friends who make much from a little; my children; nature; love; bravery; and of course, coffee!

You probably know that everyone from the Harvard Medical Journal to Oprah will tell you that gratitude can make a difference in your life. Studies show that people who feel grateful sleep better, have better relationships, are more positive, more generous, and more resilient. Neuroscientists have even discovered that gratitude *changes* your brain--MRIs have shown that people who focus on being thankful in their lives actually train their brains to be more sensitive and attentive to feeling and experiencing gratitude, *and* expressing it to other people.

Of course, not every day that we live is filled with thanksgivings and gratitude; some days are more difficult and exhausting than others. But if you were to fill out a slip for the Gratitude Jar today, what would you put on it? I’m guessing there are almost as many answers as there are people here this morning.

Gratitude...In a little village that day, the word went out that Jesus was coming--the teacher, the healer, the miracle-worker. Jesus and the disciples are in the borderland between Galilee and Samaria. You may already know that Samaritans and Jewish people who lived farther south had very little to do with one another. There were several reasons for the animosity; suffice it to say that Samaritans were seen as unclean--Jews who had intermarried with non-believers and who didn’t worship in Jerusalem. As always, Jesus moves *toward* those who are pushed to the fringes.

We can imagine that days were difficult for everyone in that small village, scraping together a living in the fields or the marketplace. But no one had a more difficult life than these 10 lepers who lived there. Not really “there” actually, because they all would have

been living on the outskirts of the village somewhere, not allowed to live with everyone else. (It's important to say that they might not have had the disease leprosy as we would think of it--many skin diseases were lumped together under that title in the 1st century--but any skin condition that others could see would make you unclean.)

Not allowed to live with others, not allowed to touch anyone or anything; exiled, lonely, unwelcome everywhere--can you imagine--they cry out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Jesus stops. Then just a look and a few words: "Go--show yourselves to the priests," and as they walk away, the sores, the scars disappear. Soon they are running, running toward the possibility of a full life again--the possibility of love, joy, and hope. Of being welcomed by others.

As they run, they run *away* from the One who healed them and gave them life again. It's a strange response, isn't it, to just keep running?

But I wonder--can we see ourselves in those people, their backs to Jesus, increasing the distance between themselves and the Giver with every step? Remember those awful pandemic days, when we all said we would *never* take anything or anyone for granted ever again? It's a hard promise to keep, isn't it?

It's not an intentional choice for any of us, it's just that so much of living every day intervenes: work and school and bills and family and homework and people who are counting on us. Pretty soon the days blur together and who has time for gratitude or saying thank you? It's not *intentional*, but it is an easy slide into using those words "I, me, mine."

We might not have the arrogance of Naaman, but how easy it is to forget that the home, the paycheck, the good grades, the friends, the faith, the beauty all around us are all a gift from God, who created and gave us every bit of it.

But one remembered. One of the ten goes running back to Jesus, praising God like someone who's been set free and welcomed home: thank you, thank you, thank you. A Samaritan, the last person Jesus' followers would have expected to make a U-turn--turns around and throws himself at Jesus' feet, praising God. So this one is the only one to hear "Get up, go on your way, your faith has *saved* you."

Everyone was healed that day--but one was *changed*--from the skin *inward* so that there was this overflowing--everything was gratitude, everything.

So all these studies and celebrities and TED talks tell us that focusing on the goodness of life, remembering to be thankful, sharing what we have makes life richer, deeper, better. *Well duh* the Bible says, and then goes one step further: scriptures and the life of Jesus tell us that acknowledging the Giver of all we have can transform *our* lives, can transform *us*.

When we respond to all that God has given us in Christ, *all* that God has given, we place our trust for all of life in the One who loves us and has saved us. Saved us from living that is just self-centered; inviting us to be people of gratitude; people who say thank you; people who, like Jake told us this morning, have experienced God's grace and put it into action.

One of the ways we do that in our congregation (in any faith community) is by giving back what we have received. We do that with our offering, with our financial commitment to the ministry that happens here at Augustana and in places we help support along the Front Range and all over the world.

If you're a member or friend of the congregation, you received a letter this week explaining the stewardship campaign and asking for your commitment or pledge. It's a big ask this year: prayerfully considering a 5% increase if you already pledge; a \$5 week commitment if you've not pledged before. If we are to continue doing ministry as a congregation (to Worship, to Grow, and to Go) our financial support needs to be boosted in a significant way. All of us, together, can say thank you by sharing generously what we've been given by God.

So what would you put in the Gratitude Jar? Make a U-turn today to say thank you to the Giver of all things.