

Learning Gratitude from the Outsider

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

October 13, 2019

by Rev. Dave Le Grand



Ten Lepers Healed - Brian Kershisnik

How many of you are feeling grateful this weekend? (show of hands)

Ok, now here is a bit more challenging question, I won't ask you to put up your hands, but think about this: How many among us make it a practice to be grateful when you are facing adversity in your lives? It is not easy!

When things are going well, I think we people of faith have enough trouble taking time to stop and thank our Creator. But those times when a person is knee deep in debt, or a tragic accident takes the life of a loved one, or coping with any number of unfortunate circumstances; well, one can imagine that gratitude is not the first instinct.

The Gospel storyteller Luke tells us a story of a leper. It's actually 10 lepers in the beginning, approaching Jesus and pleading for healing. Now scholars tell us that the word for leprosy in the Bible could be one of a number of skin diseases. But we can be

certain that in that culture, they were outsiders. Whatever unfolded that day, it was remarkable, and I think that the image above captures the moment well. Nine ecstatic individuals celebrating on the way to the priest. But the one turns around, looks at the healer, praises him, expresses his heartfelt gratitude.

Part of me wonders if the instinct to show gratitude is not somehow embedded into our DNA. I want to believe. But then I look at popular culture, and I listen to teachers lament the growing pattern of entitlement thinking among kids.

I heard a story recently, a far-too-common situation where the young child arrives at school wearing the same clothes day after day. The teacher reaches out through their network and the new and gently worn clothing arrives. The teacher shared how they felt the very moment when the child received new shoes, shirts, pants, and one cool backpack – how emotional it was to witness such joy and gratitude in the child!

Ok, I'll update my hypothesis about gratitude, then: I wonder if we are born enormously connected to our gratitude, but perhaps children become accustomed to receiving, and don't practice gratitude – maybe we disconnect from *thanks*.

I was a student in theological college years ago when a number my classmates went on a trip to Chiapas, a very economically challenged state within Mexico. Upon their return, the students and professors shared their experiences with the rest of us. One story was of being invited into a very meagre home, hardly large enough for the large family hosting the visitors. The visiting students squeezed into the tidy, small kitchen, and observed how empty the refrigerator was. But the father proudly brought out what was there divided it up among the visitors - and the hosts watched as the students awkwardly ate. The guide later told them that the family would have saved up for a long time to purchase that food they served – hospitality is central.

The hospitality was remarkable to visitors, but even more astounding was how grateful they all sounded. Listening to their Mexican hosts praise God for their blessings helped the visitors to recognize their privilege, but also to realize that having material things might at times impair our connection with gratitude.

What might that child surprised by grace, getting that cool stuff, and it not even being his birthday – what can we learn from him? That family in Chiapas – living in poverty, yet somehow seeing that they are alive and together as a family. Blessed! What might they say if they were here today?

One of my favourite writers, Anne Lamott, lived with poverty, raising a child as a young single mom, coping with addiction in her life, but God's Grace found her. She is profoundly grateful for her life, including her dark times, but mostly she is grateful for each new day. In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Lamott shares that her two favorite prayers are, in the morning, "Help me. Help me. Help me," and, at bedtime, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."¹

We have spoken before here about Luke and the Samaritans. People of faith in Jesus' time would go way out of their way to avoid walking through Samaria, seen as impure. Add to this ethnic clash the fact that the Samaritan is a leper, and we know that this is

¹ Anne Lamott. *Traveling Mercies*. © 1999 Anne Lamott. Published by Random House of Canada Limited.

very much an outsider. Jesus had told the 10 to go to the priest, they all were healed before they reached the synagogue.

“Healed.” What does that mean, Jesus saying to the man, “Your faith has healed and saved you.”? They were all freed of their skin ailment, but Jesus says, specifically, to this Samaritan – you are healed. Bible scholars suggest that for Luke, healing, Jesus’ saving, are very much connected to gratitude?² That Samaritan, that outcast even among the lepers, he was deeply connected to his sense of gratitude.

What about you and me today? On this Thanksgiving Sunday, a holiday fraught with historical questions, and, some cynical people say it has been co-opted by corporate marketing. This IS a weekend of opportunity to give thanks, to connect with gratitude. Not *in spite of* our challenges and ailments and brokenness, but, I suggest, *in the very midst* of our struggles: Gratitude.

Do you already say “Thank you, God” each day you wake up? You are a gift to someone – be assured that someone grateful for you. You are *gifted* each day; the challenge can be in finding time and space to look for it.

Perhaps the most daunting task is faced by those of us who are doing just fine, maybe *very well*. A day can pass very quickly, I know that well, when we are happily busy, occupied, even distracted. Thanksgiving might offer a reminder to me, to all of us, that life itself, our mere existence, is a miracle. Especially as we flirt with the possibility of environmental disaster. We are reminded how fragile this ecosystem is that we live in, and our interdependence with one another and with Creation. How do we turn back from our busy day to say, “Creator, thanks!”; whether at work, or volunteering, or beholding the face of one we love; or enjoying a hike or bike ride.

In the midst of life; how do we remember Gratitude?

C. S. Lewis once quipped:

I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most: while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.³

Imagine what this world might be like if more people tenaciously remembered gratitude through their day. Praise and gratitude towards God as *inner health made audible*. Here is a thought; look at that art on the screen. See the rest of the world blissfully walking away from the moment. But that one individual – it could be anyone, any life experience, stopping, turning around toward the holy – offering praise & thanks. That person can be us – humbled, amazed by life.

Even facing any number of trials and tribulations in your life.

² In *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (“Theological Perspective”, Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2), Margit Ernst-Habib compellingly states:

Luke wants us to see that the healing of the Samaritan is not only a medical cure from a severe disease and restoration of his social status...With his prostration at Jesus' feet and his giving thanks, the Samaritan demonstrates a faith that is complete because it includes thankfulness.

³ *Reflections on the Psalm*. © C. S. Lewis, 1958. Published by Geoffrey Bles, London.

Waking up and in the first yawns – find a moment for gratitude? Preparing to enjoy a meal, others are digging right in, but can we quietly, or not so quietly, take a moment for gratitude? At the doctor's office in the waiting room, an appointment you have been dreading. Can we turn to gratitude there too?

Let us all make that our practice not just this weekend, but well into next week, and all the weeks of our lives. Amen.