

Sermon for October 13, 2019 – Proper 23
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
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Thank you from the bottom of my heart: Gratitude and Healing in the Gospel

Good morning! ***Thank you from the bottom of my heart for being here***, for making time in your incredibly busy and perhaps “over-agerded” life to gather in community around this Eucharistic table to be nourished, strengthened, and commissioned to leave this place as a follower in the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love. As you know, the word, “Eucharist” from the Greek literally means “Thanksgiving.” So, welcome to this weekly thanksgiving meal.

Growing up as I did in a family business focused on hospitality, I witnessed first-hand the power of a “thank you”; of an affirmation for an “effort well-done”; of the transformative gift that grateful recognition can enact. I heard stories of former inmates who were given another chance by my Dad whose lives and the lives of their families were totally transformed by hard work, discipline, and a grateful heart. So often these men and women would describe the life they had left behind, a life of addiction, prostitution, violence and self-loathing to take one last chance at a life worth living.

Having lived in Connecticut for 6 years, I would often attend continuing education classes at Yale Divinity School. One of the most renowned contemporary theologians, Dr. Miroslav Volf, is the founder and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. The mission of the center “is to critically examine and promote practices of faith which advance authentic human flourishing and the global common good.” It’s worth repeating: “The mission of The Yale Center for Faith and Culture is to critically examine and promote practices of faith which advance human flourishing and the global common good.” The Center offers courses, webinars, conferences and lectures throughout the year focusing on four critical topics: God and Human Flourishing, the Theology of Joy and the Good Life, Life Worth Living, and Adolescent Faith and Flourishing. It’s worth checking it out!

How would you describe a “life worth living?” What does that sort of life look like for you? What stands in the way of orienting yourself *more intentionally* on a journey to a life worth living? Many of us are blessed with a life worth living and we know it. I wake up each morning and I can honestly pray these words with such a depth of gratitude, “I love my life.” I love this life... a relationship with a Triune God who loves and redeems me moment by moment, the love I share with Martha, our adult children, four grandsons, a spiritual family, a vocation as a priest in the Church and a community of friends with whom we can truly be and become more fully ourselves... and so much more. Yet it is difficult in this complex world even on a good day, **to live fully out of the place of gratitude**. And on a particularly difficult day, gratitude can feel down- right impossible to muster.

I have signed up for a Harvard Medical School newsletter called “Healthbeat.” Very recently the primary article was focused on gratitude. In fact, the title was, “Giving thanks can make you happier.” The article mentions the research of two psychologists, Dr. Robert Emmons of UC, Davis, and Dr. Michael McCulloch of the University of Miami who have done much research on gratitude. In one study, they asked all participants to write a few sentences each week focusing on various topics.

One group wrote about things they were grateful for that had occurred during the week. A second group wrote about daily irritations or things that had displeased them, and the third wrote about whatever had affected them with no emphasis either on the positive or the negative. After three weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt far more positive and hopeful about their lives. Surprisingly, they also exercised more and had fewer physical complaints and visits to physicians than those who focused on sources of aggravation. These researchers are quick to say that such studies cannot truly establish cause and effect but the research certainly bears out that there is a correlation between gratitude and a healthy life.

In our Gospel for today, we have a story of gratitude found in an unlikely person in an unlikely place. It is the healing of the ten lepers, and in Jesus’ day lepers were quite literally cut off from all social, communal settings precisely because of their physical illness. It was a condition that was met with total fear and ignorance. The leper was to be removed from sight.

These lepers represented the marginalized, the excluded, the least, the last, the lost of Jesus’ own day and time. They were exiled to the border and held hostage there. Maybe it’s human nature to draw lines, to separate ourselves from those we think we fear, for one reason or another, or those we have already judged as “other” and so put them out of our line of sight. Seems we have a lot in common with those we encounter in Luke’s Gospel today.

In this story, Jesus is “somewhere between Samaria and Galilee.” The only place scarier than a border is an “in-between” place, where boundaries and borders aren’t clear at all. ***Neither this nor that...*** is a scary place to occupy, indeed.

These ten lepers call out to Jesus across a line, the distance prescribed by the Law because of ritual impurity. They don’t approach him, for they have come to know their place, and their people. They know they don’t belong; they don’t matter; they know they are worthless, societal throwaways. They are united by their suffering and their exclusion from the wider, fearful community.

As Jesus crosses that border between Galilee and Samaria, maybe he and his disciples are remembering the Samaritan town earlier in the story that refused to welcome him. And as he enters the town, he encounters this little band of ten lepers. Notice that Jesus doesn’t call them near, and he doesn’t touch them. And most importantly, he doesn’t withhold healing. Just a word, a command, and he sends them on their way in anticipation of what will happen on the road ---- healing.

Nine of them, Jews themselves, hurry to do what lepers are supposed to do: go show themselves to the priest and get him to stamp the certificate that says their safe to re-enter society, a double dose of healing indeed. Physical healing and now belonging once again to community. These nine former lepers are healed and restored to community and to a life worth living.

And yet, one of them, the Samaritan, turns around and goes back. This outsider, this “other” may be so seized by gratitude and joy that he turns back to Jesus. It’s important, however, for us to note that the Temple where the nine former lepers now receive their certificates and their invitation to take their place in community life, would not be a place of welcome for the Samaritan. This “other” remains “other” by virtue of his ethnicity. As one commentator stated, “There’s no cure for being a Samaritan.”

When Luke wrote his Gospel, he shaped stories about Jesus that he had heard into one great big story that helped an early Christian community to understand the Gospel in their own context, to hear God speaking Good News to them where they were, to shine a light on problems their community was facing, just as we do today, as people of faith.

One of the things early Christians wrestled with was how to relate to the Jewish roots of their faith AND what they should do about all these Gentiles coming into their churches. ... the fear of too many of “these” and too many of “those.”

Today, our churches are not struggling so much with the Jewish-Gentile question, although there’s a lot of history that such a conversation remains important for us. Nonetheless, one way to approach this text is to find our place in the story. Maybe we’re the disciples, watching all this and wanting to get back on the road and not wanting this Samaritan to hold things up. Maybe we’re one of the nine lepers, and we’re trying to obey the Law at all costs and just want to get back to having a life worth living. Or maybe we’re in the crowd watching it all happening and wondering, “This can’t be what it seems to be. So maybe it has nothing to do with us.”

And maybe, just maybe, at least once or twice in our lives, we know what it feels to be the tenth leper. The one who has nothing to lose in turning away from the path to the Temple. This former leper is still the “outsider” here, to the crowd around Jesus. He knows that a word from Jesus, spoken in compassion, gives him salvation, that is healing, because it has literally torn down the wall that has kept him on the border of life, as a worthless alien.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon on this text agrees that the nine were fulfilling expectations and doing their duty by obeying the Law. She writes: “Ten behaved like good lepers, good Jews; only one, a double loser, behaved like a man in love.” She goes on to comment how hard she tries to fulfill

expectations and obey rules and be a good and faithful church member. “Oh, I know how to be obedient,” she says, “but I do not always know how to be in love.”

My friends, who, in this gospel claims your attention this day? Who are people you would most prefer to avoid, to exile, to set apart on the border? Who are the ones you most often think of or describe as “Well, they’re not like me.” A confession... if I really thought and prayed about it, my list on any given day would honestly make me shudder. And shudder, I should. So I ask myself: “Where is the dividing line between “us” and “them” in my life?” ***Who are the ones on your list?***

Jesus invites us to listen the Good News proclaimed this day. How can you and I dig underneath long-held suspicions, judgments and biases and experience our own much needed healing? How are you and I called to a life worth living? A life lived fully, richly, and abundantly in gratitude and love?

May you and I give our whole heart over to honestly praying for such healing and when offered, may we be truly, deeply, grateful! Amen.