

GRATITUDE: THANKSGIVING PEOPLE

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: Luke 17:11-18

In the early morning hours of September 8, 1860, Edward Spencer, a seminary student at Garrett Biblical Institute, was walking with some friends along the shores of Lake Michigan, near Evanston. All of the sudden they ran into a man who told him that there had been a terrible accident on Lake Michigan. The Lady Elgin – a steamer with 398 passengers - had been shipwrecked, near the shores of Winnetka – some 5 miles away. Immediately Spencer and his friends left to quickly get up to Winnetka to see if they could do anything to help. Spencer was a skilled swimmer and ready and able to do what he could to rescue the people from the sinking ship. With violent breaking waves – it took great effort for *all* the rescuers to bring the people to safety. Spencer had a rope tied around him, and the rope was held by people on the shore, ready to pull them in if something bad happened.

Time and again, Spencer would go out and see how many people he could rescue. After saving 17 people, Spencer had lost all strength and was carried away exhausted. He was dubbed a hero in the Chicago Tribune. But Spencer, didn't see himself a hero – rather he kept thinking about the 300 people who lost their lives that day. A nagging question in his mind was, "Did I do my best?"

Spencer never fully recovered from his rescue efforts and eventually dropped out of school and never became a minister. He spent the rest of his life, living as a semi-invalid.

Many decades later, Spencer now an elderly man – was interviewed about that event. At the end of the interview, Spencer was asked one final question: "Mr. Spencer, so much has been written about that fateful day and *your* heroic efforts. What is the one thing you walk away with from that day? What is the one thing that stands out more than anything else?" Without missing a beat, Spencer answered, "Ever since that day, not one of the 17 has ever come back and said, 'thank you'." ¹

Isn't that incredible! Not one single thank you! After I heard that story, I was so saddened for this hero – and was also curious as to why no one looked him up – just to say, thank you for saving my life. I guess, it really isn't all that unusual, especially when you think about our story that we hear today from the Gospel of Luke. It's found in the 17th chapter, verses 11-19. Get your Bibles and follow along as Carson Stecher reads it for us:

¹¹ As Jesus continued on toward Jerusalem, he reached the border between Galilee and Samaria. ¹² As he entered a village there, ten men with leprosy stood at a distance, ¹³ crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ He looked at them and said, "Go show yourselves to the priests. And as they went, they were cleansed of their leprosy. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back to Jesus, shouting, "Praise God!" ¹⁶ He fell to the ground at Jesus' feet, thanking him for what he had done. This man was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to the man, "Stand up and go. Your faith has healed you."

Thank you, Carson – you did a great job and I love your smile!

Our story begins with ten lepers – who lived a horrible life. Leprosy was a highly contagious – dreaded disease of their day. It attacked the body with sores that eventually led to the loss of sensation in nerve endings - which often resulted in missing fingers, toes, and entire arms or legs could even fall off.

Their bodies would have been almost grotesque in appearance – and the stench of the rotting flesh was unbearable.

But almost as bad or maybe even worse, would have been the emotional pain. Jewish law required that lepers stay away from other people – including family – and live in isolated colonies. There would be no physical contact at all – no kiss goodbye to loved ones, no touch at all for fear you would infect the other person. If a healthy person ventured too close, the lepers were to warn them by crying out in humiliation, “Unclean! Unclean!” Think about what life was like for them – the continual pain of your body deteriorating – without any medical help. The isolation from people who loved and cared for you – and the daily announcement to everyone about how unclean you are. They lived in desperation and pain and sorrow.

And then they meet Jesus. They called out to Him, “Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us.” Jesus did have mercy on them. But notice what He does. He doesn’t heal them immediately. He tells them to go show themselves to the priests...so that they could declare them clean.

Now just think how those lepers must have felt. They looked down at their bodies. Their limbs were still mangled, and their skin was still just as repulsive as ever. Nothing had cleared or healed. And they must have thought, “How can I go see the priest, looking like this? They won’t let us go into town – let alone go see the priest with my skin and limbs looking like this.” But somehow, those 10 lepers must have believed Him – because they all got up to go see the priest, even though their bodies were still wracked with the misery of leprosy. And then notice what happens in verse 14. . . it says, “*along the way*, they were healed”!! The miracle happened – along the path – *after* they had left Jesus. It took faith for them to go and do what Jesus told them to do – and the blessing came afterwards.

I found it interesting to think about this order of events, especially when I read a message from a Rev. Andy Cook who said, “*In order for the miracle to happen, these men had to start walking in faith before their circumstances changed one tiny bit.... And that is the nature of God, a God who loves you so much . . . He’ll give you the opportunity to be thankful when nothing about your circumstances gives you that motivation.... that is the very definition of faith. If you praised God only on the good days, only in the best of circumstances, it would not be faith at all. That would be more like a business arrangement - and this is not about business!*”² God might call you to praise Him, despite the illness – to thank Him, even in the midst of difficult relationships or the lack of resources. To be faithful even on the darkest of days or the worst of circumstances.

It could be that may be you right now. Maybe you are walking in the most difficult of circumstances. It seems like all of us are going through some of that, in some ways – feeling hopeless and helpless with the pandemic and the ever-increasing number of cases and deaths. And then to put on top of all of that, the increased division and polarization in our country – the anger and hatred. And even though we now know who our next President will be – there will still be fears and worries and division. I think we can all say together that we are weary and want this all just to stop so we can get back to normal. It has gone on for too long. Don’t we all yearn for healing.... healing from a pandemic, healing from the deep wounds in our country. I know I have found myself praying just like the lepers in our story, “Jesus, please have mercy on us all!” It would be easy just to complain about everything – to keep our eyes on all of the pain and frustration. And go about our days, weary and worn and not at all hopeful about the future. But what about being grateful? Could we choose to be grateful – to make that decision to trust and be faithful, *despite* our circumstances? Can we call out to Jesus, like the lepers did – and then follow Him faithfully, even if we don’t see the change immediately in our situation?

I believe that when we *choose* to have faith – when we choose to be grateful – despite our circumstances – that is when blessings can abound. God can fill us with His deep and abiding joy and peace and presence...even amid the difficult circumstances.

You might remember the story of a man who found the barn where Satan kept his seeds ready to be sown in the human heart. What was interesting was that the seeds of discouragement were more numerous than others; and he found out that that *those* seeds could be made to grow almost anywhere.

When Satan was questioned, he reluctantly admitted that there was one place in which he could never get them to thrive. “And where is that?”, asked the man. Satan replied sadly, “In the heart of a grateful person.”³

Why do the seeds of discouragement not thrive in the heart of a grateful person? Because the eyes of that person are not focused on all his or her troubles and problems. Rather they are focused on Jesus and all the many blessings God has given him or her. In the midst of those trials and struggles, that grateful person is always on the look out for ways that God is at work in his or her life, rather than always complaining and doubting.

We do know that all the lepers in our story were healed physically in our story...but we also know there was only one person who returned to Jesus shouting his praises for being healed. And notice how Jesus responds to him. Look at verse 17: “*Jesus asked, “Didn’t I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? 18 Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?” 19 And Jesus said to the man, “Stand up and go. Your faith has healed you.*” “The Greek word used here for healed is the word *kath-a-ri-dzo*, the root word for our word “catheter.” It is a medical word in part, for it means, “remove the impurities.” When a doctor inserts a heart “cath”, angioplasty might remove a blockage of an artery.”⁴ In this sense, Jesus not only healed the leper, physically like restoring a damaged hand or limb; – he also caused a complete healing of the heart of this grateful leper. He lifted him up out of the dark pit of despair and healed both emotionally – and physically.

And I believe when we turn to God and make a choice to be grateful instead of fretful – even in the worst of times – God can do the same for us. God can help us to see the light in the darkness and the hope amid despair. Medical doctors and psychologists have confirmed that when we deliberately cultivate gratitude, it is “good for us physically and emotionally.”

One document from Advent Health shared, “*We’re living through unusual and trying times. The COVID 19 pandemic has left us all feeling stressed and frightened. That’s why it is more important than ever to focus on gratitude – which is good for your mental and physical health – and will help you stay well through the pandemic and beyond. Gratitude can actually improve your immune system – can lower your risk for mental health issues, can help you get a handle on stress.*”⁵

I read this week that “gratitude is not an inborn trait but rather is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time.” (?source) And the more you “practice” it – you will not only grow in your faith, but you will also be an encouraging example and witness to others. And my goodness – how badly we need examples of grateful people in our world. Just listen to the headline news and you’ll see how little words of gratitude are expressed. Instead you hear words of accusation, excuses, anger, complaint that seems to dominate our world. To simply just say how “grateful” we are or how “blessed” we are, can actually be counter-cultural – changing our environment and encouraging others, rather than adding to their complaints and their misery.

So, here’s just a few ways you can “choose gratitude”:

Make a list – count your blessings! Somehow it helps change your perspective and your way of thinking if you actually take the time to reflect and write down what you are grateful for. You can do it in a journal – or there are even Gratitude Journaling apps on your phone you can use. Research has shown that logging “3 good things” every day can make significant benefits in happiness, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Review your list or even add to the list before you go to bed - and you’ll soon discover that a grateful heart will help you even sleep better!

Another way we can “choose gratitude” is to remember past struggles we have gone through – and remember how God helped you in the past. God was faithful to help you then – and He can be trusted to be faithful to help you today and in the future. Dwell on those promises of God and thank Him for working in your life. Look to how big and good God is and see your problems and fears shrink in size and your peace and joy grow.

And then try your best to find ways to show gratitude to others – in your words and actions. Be positive and uplifting in your social media – and in the way you interact with folks. Being grateful is really highly contagious and can help change your whole world.

And finally, use be intentional every day to specifically have an attitude of gratitude. The great English author Charles Dickens once said that we are somewhat backward here in America. Instead of having just one Thanksgiving Day each year, we should have 364. “Use that one day just for complaining and griping,” he said. “Use the other 364 days to thank God each day for the many blessings he has showered upon you.”

What a difference it would make if we could do just that very thing! What do you think – would you be up for the challenge?

PRAYER

RESOURCES

¹I researched this story through several sources after hearing it mentioned in a sermon by Chris Brown at North Coast Church, <https://www.northcoastchurch.com/messages/1-the-nine-guys-who-missed-thanksgiving/>. I verified details through a Northwestern & Evanston Newspaper, “*‘Did I Do My Best’: The Mythology of Edward Spencer – Hero of the Lady Elgin Disaster.*” By Peter Warren. September 7, 2020. <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2020/09/07/campus/did-i-do-my-best-the-mythology-of-edward-spencer-hero-of-the-lady-elgin-disaster/>

² Andy Cook – “*A Lifestyle of Thanksgiving – Luke 17*” <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-thanksgiving-lifestyle-lepers-healed-luke-17>

³Natalie Nichols, “*The One Place Discouragement Won’t Sprout.*” [thankfulness-4-the-one-place-discouragement-wont-sprout/](#) [thankfulness-4-the-one-place-discouragement-wont-sprout/](#)

⁴Andy Cook – “*A Lifestyle of Thanksgiving – Luke 17*”

⁵AdventHealth, “*Why Gratitude is Important During the Coronavirus Pandemic*”, 4/23/2020.
<https://www.adventhealth.com/blog/why-gratitude-important-during-coronavirus-pandemic>

⁶Redeemer Lutheran Church, “*364 Days of Thanksgiving*”, <https://welsredeemer.org/364-days-thanksgiving/>

BENEDICTION

And now as you go into this new week –
Be thankful always.
Have gratitude in your hearts to the Lord.
Let your life overflow with praise.
And the God of all love and grace,
The giver of every good and perfect gift,
Will fill your life with happy songs of joy.