

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 12, 2025
Psalm 66:1-7; Luke 17:11-19

"An Attitude of Gratitude"

One day a sad and bedraggled man made an appointment with the city's most famous and expensive doctor. At the office visit, the first thing he admitted was that he couldn't afford to pay the customary \$1,000 fee. The doctor had had a particularly good day and was feeling charitable, so he reduced his fee to \$500. "But doctor," begged the sick man, "I have a wife and seven kids to support," and so the doctor further reduced his fee to \$250. The man sighed, "For me that's food for my family for a week." At this the doctor said \$150 and at the stricken look on the man's face finally said, "I know when I'm beat - \$50.

But first, tell me this: I am known as the top doctor in the city, the most expensive one for a hundred miles, why did you come to me?" "Because," answered the man emphatically, "where my health is concerned, money is no object."

As silly as this story is, it accurately reflects what appears to be a growing attitude in our culture - an outlook on life which seems to say, "life owes me." Wherever we turn we encounter people who think that health, wealth and happiness ought to be guaranteed as a birthright. Not only that, when they enjoy good health, prosperity, and fulfillment, they act as if they deserve it.

In our era shoulder strain from patting ourselves on the back has become a common ailment. It's not just that we're complacent about the relative ease of our lives, many times we are downright ungrateful. There are times that I am tempted to think that the reason I have the privilege of standing in this pulpit and calling myself your Pastor, is due to my exceptional qualifications, but the truth of the matter is that I am here because God put me here. I try not to let a single day go by without praising and thanking God for calling me to serve in such a wonderful congregation, but my good intentions don't always win out when pitted against my ego and my schedule. Ingratitude is pervasive, but not just in today's society.

Jesus encountered it numerous times, one of which is reported by Luke in today's lesson. As Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem for his final showdown with the church bureaucrats, he came upon a group of ten people who were suffering from leprosy.

Lepers were forced to live outside any inhabited areas and were forbidden to have any contact with anyone other than lepers. They were not even allowed to talk with those who were "clean," and had to beg for food and clothing, which meant that they couldn't even come close to plead their cases. They were shunned until they finally died of starvation or leprosy. Lepers were people who had run out of options.

But on the day they met Jesus, all that changed. There he was coming down the road toward them. Even lepers had their ways of getting information, so they had heard about this Jesus and the miraculous healings he had performed, even to the point of raising a man from death. We don't really know what made them approach Jesus. Maybe they looked at one another and shrugged their disease deformed shoulders, figuring they had nothing to lose. Maybe, in spite of their disease, they had a solid faith that God wouldn't abandon them.

What we do know is that they took a significant risk even in calling out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" The acknowledgement of Jesus as "Master," and the urgency of their plea suggest that their faith in Jesus was authentic. "Go and show yourselves to the priests," Jesus said to them, knowing full well that before a leper could return to society, their cure had to be validated by the priest. It was one thing to cry out for help. It was quite another to act in faith that somehow, with all evidence to the contrary, they would be cured. That's just what they did.

They started out down the road toward the Temple before experiencing a cure, realizing that if they got to the Temple and were not cured, very likely, they would be stoned to death. But they went anyway, and that's when it happened. Somewhere on the way, while they plodded along, placing one flesh-eaten foot ahead of the other, they noticed a quickening of their step because their feet and legs didn't ache any more. The further they went, the better they felt. They really were cured and couldn't wait to present themselves to the priest so that they could return to a normal life. Who can blame them? They did what most of us would do. They took care of "first things first." There would be time enough to go back and thank Jesus once they had been certified as clean.

The problem was that like most good intentions, this one was never fulfilled; except by one leper, a Samaritan, who in that era, was even more of an outcast than the other outcasts. Before he got to town to get his "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," he went back, praising God all the way. He knew the source of his cure, and he knew that his healing wouldn't be complete without returning thanks. There, at Jesus' feet, this lone leper lay stretched out with his face in the dirt, and his eyes straining up at Jesus, and said, "Thanks."

That's all. No flowery language. No questions asked. He simply thanked Jesus. And Jesus told him that now his healing was complete. He was not just cured, he was healed.

But before Jesus sent the ex-leper on his way with the words, "your faith has made you well," he asked three questions which penetrate the insulation of twenty centuries as they pierce our hearts: "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Jesus posed these questions not to the missing lepers, but to his followers, because he recognized that ingratitude retards our search for wholeness. Although God enjoys our gratefulness, the Lord doesn't need to receive our thanks - we need to give them. Gratitude is for our benefit.

There is a story told about a certain man who had been a faithful builder for his employer for many years. His employer decided to take a world cruise. Before leaving, he gave his builder plans for constructing an ideal house. "Build it according to specification, spare no necessary expense," he said. "I want this house to be the best house we have ever built for a special reason." After the employer left town, the builder began to think of the many years he had worked for small wages and decided to make a profit for himself, so he substituted cheap materials wherever it would not show.

On his return, the employer observed the house with satisfaction and said, "You have served me well these many years. As a reward, I have planned this house for you. It is yours to own, and to live in."

Ingratitude robs us of our finest, most joyful moments, and cheapens our lives. Every missed opportunity for expressing gratitude diminishes our spiritual health. Jesus knew that when he contrasted the cure of the nine with the healing of the one. The nine were satisfied with the physical cure, but the one sought the completion of his healing by returning thanks to God.

Like the nine, many of us have stopped short of the goal of wholeness because of our own ingratitude. Sometimes it is simply forgetfulness. But there are other reasons for our ingratitude. Some people take what they have for granted. They assume that somehow it is a birthright to be where they are and have what they have. They forget that all that we are and all that we have comes from God.

Sometimes folks assume that life owes them a comfortable existence without much effort on their part. Other people convince themselves that they deserve all the good they have because they have worked hard for it. Still others become so focused on their problems that they are blinded to life's blessings. None of these attitudes are biblical because they are self-focused.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to focus upon God so that we can see God within, above, beneath, and behind every blessing that comes our way. In fact, when we focus upon God, we don't even need to count our blessings in order to express our gratitude. As Christians, gratitude is to flow from us no matter what. Gratitude is not really dependent upon circumstances at all; gratitude calls attention to the giver not the gift. This is a kind of a "primal gratitude," in which we enter life with gratefulness no matter what.

Christian gratitude expresses thanks not only for what we have and who we are, but most importantly for whose we are. Our gratitude grows out of our faith and trust in the great high Priest, Jesus Christ, to whom we all show ourselves, clean and unclean alike, believing that only through him can we be made whole. God wants us to come freely with an attitude of gratitude.

Jesus could have sent his disciples charging out after the lax lepers to drag them back and force them into the proper attitude, but that is not God's way. God grants us the flexibility to determine when or whether to return thanks. We might even say that God grants us the latitude for an attitude of gratitude - and that's no platitude!

Whether it's in our prayers or our worship, our work or our stewardship, we are summoned to express our gratitude to God. There are no prayers effusive enough; there is no worship jubilant enough; there is no benevolence charitable enough; nor is there any offering large enough to repay God for all we are and have. But we must continue to expand our attitude of gratitude.

We should never be content with the status quo in our relationship with God. We should always be seeking ways to increase our prayers, worship, ministry and giving to glorify God, not because it's what God needs, but because it's what's best for us.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, "If one should give me a dish of sand, and tell me there were particles of iron in it, I might look with my eyes for them, and search for them with my clumsy fingers, and be unable to find them; but let me take a magnet and sweep it, and how it would draw to itself the most invisible particles by the power of attraction! The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day, and, as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find in every hour some heavenly blessing."

An attitude of gratitude benefits us through the healing and wholeness we find in expressing our thanks to God. Speaking as one laggard leper to another, I'm ready to increase my attitude of gratitude. How about you?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen