

Providence Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. David Pettit

September 25, 2022

Luke 17: 11-19 “Grant us Soft Hearts – Gratitude and Praise”

Where does gratitude come from? Have you ever said these or similar words to someone: You should be grateful! And how did that go? It’s one of those things that doesn’t work as an imperative, does it?

How do you make people grateful? What factors might soften our hearts and make us ooze with gratitude? How do you cultivate gratefulness in yourself?

My first thought is that difficulty and hardship can soften our hearts and cause us to have perspective and, thus, gratefulness. However, this is no guarantee. Sometimes hardship makes us bitter and resentful and causes us to double down on bad habits and emotional responses. Our gospel reading highlights a group of ten living in the region between Samaria and Galilee, where these groups might cross paths or travel adjacent to each other’s towns. It is a group of ten, ten obviously a good number for story-telling. While they all live with a particular kind of hardship, they don’t all respond the same to the help that comes. Perhaps hardship is not a guarantee.

We are told they approach Jesus as he enters the village, though at a distance. Approaching, but at a distance. Calling out for help from a distance. It is the pattern, the muscle memory one develops. Call out for help, but do not draw too close, lest you unnerve somebody or invoke an unpleasant reaction or accusation. You learn to do so when you spend your life as a leper.

Leprosy was a condition whose effects were more social than physical. Deemed contagious and unclean, thus removed from social life. So, these ten lepers called out, like they did a thousand times before. We have a sparse description of the exchange. So, we might be tempted to assume they were asking for healing on a quick read. But, it doesn’t say that. The passage merely tells us that they cried out from a distance, like they did thousands of times before, for some kind of help or mercy. Perhaps crying out for food, or for loose change, perhaps a spare shirt or blanket. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

When Jesus told them to go show themselves to the priest, did they know what to anticipate? What did they think Jesus meant? Did they think they were going to be inspected by the priest to re-enter life? Did they anticipate being able to re-enter social spheres, to be able to worship at the Temple, return to families, to be able to

walk through town and not worry about getting too close, not to have to call out urging people to keep their distance? Did they have any idea?

It is interesting that at least one of them was a Samaritan, we are told. Certainly, he couldn't have expected to be accepted at the Temple. Surely the priest would not proclaim him clean. Being healed of leprosy is one thing, but to come from a mixed lineage, to honor the wrong ancestors, to worship in the wrong place; these things are not forgiven near so easy.

That is the interesting thing here. Perhaps this is the advantage that adversity brings; it changes our perspectives and causes us to form new circles of community. These ten wouldn't be a group under normal circumstances. Their tribal and ancestral differences would have kept them apart, seeing each other through those differences. But through their shared experience of leprosy and being ostracized, they are now a little community. And so, it seems the Samaritan starts off to the south towards the Temple along with the others. Perhaps hoping only for food, clothing, or alms.

I commented last week about how we sometimes only learn empathy for certain experiences when we go through it ourselves. I mentioned how we form little secret societies made up of those who might understand; a circle of fellowship where others can comprehend something of what you have experienced, whereas the general public has only platitudes, or ugly assumptions, or callous unwelcome comments. This is true for those who have lost children, or those recovering from addiction, or those caring for aging parents, or who have watched a loved one decline, a child struggle to thrive, those who have battled cancer, and so on. We go through things only to find ourselves understanding an experience that had long been opaque to us, and once we pass through that portal where we might now understand and have compassion, people come out of the woodwork telling their own stories.

I wonder what kind of stories this band of lepers told around the campfire as they dwelt outside the village in caves or other out-of-the-way places, keeping their distance from the main population. What stories came forth? Stories about how old their children are now, how long it had been since they had touched their spouses, or how their friends tell them that if they just confessed their sin, maybe they would get better. You see, the sting of leprosy was not skin blemishes; it was the way it tore your world apart, cut you off from family and synagogue and Temple, and perhaps as a cumulative effect, God.

But as they went on their way, they discovered their leprosy had disappeared. They were clean. Their skin was no longer blemished in such a way as to ostracize them. Their trip to the Temple now takes on a new possibility. Now they have expectations of returning to their old lives, entering the temple courts, or returning home to their families. We do tend to assume this is a positive change in their lives. Though I assume that at least one of them imploded, I mean statistically. To upend their lives and expect them to know how to handle it and adapt, it doesn't always work that way.

Well, it is all speculation, I suppose. We are only told of the one. And the center or fulcrum of the story is this: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice." And next we hear, "he prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan." It is a common trope or motif in scripture, the gospels in particular, to highlight the one who is different, the foreigner, the outsider – to highlight these figures for their responsiveness to Jesus while those that we might expect to be responsive are not.

Now one reason this Samaritan turns back is that he has nothing to gain by going to the Temple. He is not Jewish. However, beyond this practical aspect, his is lifted up for his spirit of praise and gratitude, not just over his change in circumstances, but in relation to the one who healed him. He is kind of a poster child for a value of the broader Evangelical tradition, which goes back to the mid-18th century – an emphasis on spiritual fervency and of a personal faith, a personal relationship with Christ. Yes, he was healed along with the others. Yes, his life is changed too; he too has a life to get on to. But his response is that of praise. It is to bow before the one who healed him. He exemplifies a value not just on God's benefits but on our relationship to God; not just on being healed but being drawn close to the one who heals.

You see, there is a general sense of gratitude, like telling your kids that they should be thankful that they have food to eat at every meal, for many in the world do not. Like being thankful for the freedom to gather and worship in a free society. Like being thankful for family, and friends, and good food, and beautiful sunsets over the mountains. But this is not the gratitude in our story, not the primary gratitude that we seek to show in this sanctuary. The gratitude that comes bursting forth from this man is the kind of gratitude we feel when we realize that we made some essential passage that we could not have done on our own. We have passed through a portal into a new perspective on life, a new lease on life, a new approach to life; gone from death to life, from being lost to being found; a sense that who you have become and are becoming is the result of some intervention that we did not realize until it was done. When we realize we are new, and do not know who we would

be, or where we would be, without that intervention, without having emerged through that dark portal. It is that emotional perspective that is the spring of gratitude and praise.

I think of the season when I started taking Hebrew. It was a season where I felt dry spiritually, where ministry demanded a wisdom I didn't have yet. And then we entered a season of grief as we lost our first child. It was a season of confusion, of floundering, and being overwhelmed. And in that uncharted territory, it was my Hebrew professor, Bryan Widbin, and my soon-to-be mentor and pastor Thom Fiet, who became guides, unanticipated, and quite different from any I would have expected or chosen. I went to Hebrew class and was nourished, and learned from Thom Fiet, and leaned on Thom like crutch, to get my strength back, to stand up straight again. I started CPE and was guided and taught by my supervisor Trudi Hirsch.

And as I was finishing CPE and was taking my first full-time call, and as I was processing my journey over those years, I remember being overcome with gratitude, with a sense of - I do not know how things would have gone for me if it had not been for such mentors and guides. It was that sense of gratitude in realizing I had passed through a portal into a new season of life and ministry.

It is the Samaritan that responds in this way. He returns, praising God in a loud voice, no longer keeping a distance but falling prostrate at Jesus' feet. He has passed through a portal into a new perspective on life, into a joyful response. He realizes that who he has become and is becoming is the result of some unexpected intervention. And that intervention draws him closer to the intervener.

At the heart of the gospel narrative is the story of grace, a new life offered; the old has gone, and something new has begun, where we become new creations. I was blind, but now I see. I was lost and now am found. It is the spring of the fountain of praise, where joy and praise spring forth, not from a general sense of gratitude for blessings but from a realization that God has made and is making us new through these gracious interventions.

The last line of our story reads: "Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'" It is interesting because he had already been healed of the leprosy. So, is Jesus reiterating the earlier healing or saying something new? I am not sure, but I'm thinking about what I said at the beginning, that hardship is not the sole ingredient to gratitude and praise and a soft heart. And furthermore, having an affliction removed is not the same as being made well. Not everybody that endures hardship or that gets relief produces kindness and gratitude and praise.

Perhaps being made well is something different. Maybe it has to do with how we respond to all those circumstances. Maybe being is about that moving closer to the one who heals. Maybe about that realization that who we are and who we are becoming is the result of some great intervention. We cannot help but cry out in a loud voice...some word of praise.

May God grant us the softness of heart to let our resentments go, and to take the opportunity to draw near our savior. To let entitlements go, and see how God is at work in our lives. To let our resumes go, and instead give praise for what God is doing in us.

May we be as attentive to the person we want to be as the poet is in our poem this morning. Circumstances, one way or another, are not enough. Perhaps the soft grateful heart is something that must be nourished and attended to. Ten enjoyed the benefits, but only one drew closer to Christ because of it. Only one displayed joy and praise. God, grant us soft hearts.

And all God's people said...

Luke 17: 11-19

*Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers*

<sup>11</sup> On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup> As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, <sup>13</sup> they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” <sup>14</sup> When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. <sup>15</sup> Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup> He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup> Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” <sup>18</sup> Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” <sup>19</sup> Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

**“The Most Important Thing” by Julia Fehrenbacher**

I am making a home inside myself. A shelter  
of kindness where everything  
is forgiven, everything allowed—a quiet patch  
of sunlight to stretch out without hurry,  
where all that has been banished  
and buried is welcomed, spoken, listened to—released.

A fiercely friendly place I can claim as my very own.

I am throwing arms open  
to the whole of myself—especially the fearful,  
fault-finding, falling apart, unfinished parts, knowing  
every seed and weed, every drop  
of rain, has made the soil richer.

I will light a candle, pour a hot cup of tea, gather  
around the warmth of my own blazing fire. I will howl  
if I want to, knowing this flame can burn through  
any perceived problem, any prescribed perfectionism,  
any lying limitation, every heavy thing.

I am making a home inside myself  
where grace blooms in grand and glorious  
abundance, a shelter of kindness that grows  
all the truest things.

I whisper hallelujah to the friendly  
sky. Watch now as I burst into blossom.

## Psalm 124

*Thanksgiving for Israel's Deliverance*

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

- <sup>1</sup> If it had not been the LORD who was on our side  
—let Israel now say—
- <sup>2</sup> if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,  
when our enemies attacked us,
- <sup>3</sup> then they would have swallowed us up alive,  
when their anger was kindled against us;
- <sup>4</sup> then the flood would have swept us away,  
the torrent would have gone over us;
- <sup>5</sup> then over us would have gone  
the raging waters.
- <sup>6</sup> Blessed be the LORD,  
who has not given us  
as prey to their teeth.
- <sup>7</sup> We have escaped like a bird  
from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped.
- <sup>8</sup> Our help is in the name of the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.