

Sermon Proper 23

Year C

[RCL] Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

The Test of all Happiness is Gratitude

Gratitude has become something of a hot topic among psychologists recently. And what is really interesting is that the research is showing is that gratitude is good for you. It seems as though gratitude has a number of positive benefits and it correlates with higher levels of well-being and health. Grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, optimism and lower levels of depression and stress. Gratitude often nurtures generalized compassion and altruistic behavior in people. And there is even some evidence based on studies using state of the art monitoring techniques that gratitude is good for your heart.

Pretty interesting stuff! We have some scientific evidence which shows that gratitude and the practice of gratitude has positive benefits. But as Dr. Robert Emmons notes in “Why Gratitude is Good” grateful people do not take a Pollyannaish view of the world. He says, “This doesn’t mean that life is perfect; it doesn’t ignore complaints, burdens, and hassles. But when we look at life as a whole, gratitude encourages us to identify some amount of goodness in our life.” Gratitude helps us to acknowledge in the midst of our complex lives, the many gifts, large and small, that have been given to us by others and by God. Dr. Emmons and others are showing that grateful people and people who cultivate the practice of gratitude are leading happier and healthier lives.

Perhaps what we are getting is some empirical verification for what philosophers and religious teachers have been telling us for some time. Cicero said, “There is no quality I would rather have, and be thought to have, than gratitude. For it is not only the greatest virtue, but is the mother of all the rest.” Meister Eckhart famously said, “If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” And G. K. Chesterton said, “The test of all happiness is gratitude.”

In our gospel lesson 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 the community because of their physical illness. It was a condition that was met with fear and ignorance. The leper was to be removed from sight and isolated from all communal and religious contact. In Leviticus, the law says, “The leper who has the disease shall wear torn cloths and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.” Disease and isolation are multiple illnesses.

While Jesus is traveling through Samaria and Galilee on the way to Jerusalem, a group of ten lepers draws near, but they are also careful not to get too close. They drew near out of their need; they keep

their distance because of their disease. Their illness creates a barrier between them and others, between themselves and the community. But notice that in the presence of Jesus, the lepers do not cry out “Unclean, unclean.” Rather, they cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

Out of the pain of their disease and the depths of their isolation, they cry out to the Lord to have mercy on them.

And he does. Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priest as the law requires when someone is healed. And as they go, they are made clean. Restored to health, they will also be restored to the community. No more wearing torn cloths: tattered garments on a tattered body. No more long hair hanging over their blotched and blemished faces. No more yelling out “Unclean, unclean” from covered lips. No more dwelling alone outside the camp.

But a funny thing happens on the way to see the priests. One of the lepers who was healed turns back and praises God. He prostrates himself at Jesus’ feet and he thanks him. And the surprise ending of this story is that the one who praises God and gives thanks for his healing is a Samaritan. He was not only physically ill, but also a social outcast and a religious heretic. The one isolated not only by illness, but also by his culture and religion turns back and gives praise to God. We are not told why the other lepers who had been healed did not turn back.

For some gratitude seems more like a vice than a virtue. It seems to express a sense of neediness and dependence that many would rather not acknowledge or if they do acknowledge it they resent it. But gratitude was a highly esteemed virtue in Judaism. We get a sense of this from the *Nishmat*, a prayer recited in the Sabbath morning service: “Were our mouth as full of song as the sea, and our tongue as full of joyous song as its multitude of waves, and our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the heavens, and our eyes as brilliant as the sun and the moon, and our hands as outspread as the eagles of the sky and our feet as swift as hinds -- we still could not thank You sufficiently, Ha Shem our God and God of our forefathers, and to bless Your Name for even one of the thousand thousand, thousands of thousands and myriad myriads of favors, miracles and wonders that you performed for our ancestors and for us.”

It is somewhat ironic then, that it is only the foreigner who returns and gives thanks and praise to God. In the return of the Samaritan leper, we have a story that is not just about physical healing. It is a story about the healing of all those things that keep us separated from each other and exiled from God. Out of our pain, out of our isolation, out of our despair we cry out across the abyss, “Lord, have mercy on us.” In the presence of Christ, in the nearness of the Lord, we are healed, made whole, restored to our community and reconciled to God.

Our earthly lives are a journey, somewhere between Samaria and Galilee, between illness and health, between exile and return. We are all traveling along the way. Because of the frailty of our bodies we will all succumb to illness at some point in our lives. Because of the devices and desires of the human heart, we will all suffer from the fear and distrust that separates us from our neighbors and from God.

But rather than remaining within the darkness of our despair and keeping ourselves at a great distance from others, our Lord bids us draw near, even as he draws near. He awaits our cry for mercy and he responds by making us whole, by restoring us to life with others and by reconciling us with God. And he keeps scanning the horizon, looking for the other people whom he has already healed, who will realize one day that they too are already forgiven, that they too are already being made whole, who will return to him, and give thanks and praise to God.

In his memoir, *All I Could Never Be*, Beverly Nichols, recalls an experience of gratitude in his garden. He says, “It was inevitable, I suppose, that in the garden I should begin, at long last, to ask myself what lay behind all this beauty. When guests were gone and I had the flowers all to myself, I was so happy that I wondered why at the same time I was haunted by a sense of emptiness. It was as though I wanted to thank somebody, but had nobody to thank; which is another way of saying that I felt the need for worship. That is, perhaps, the kindest way in which a person may come to his or her God. There is an interminable literature on the origins of the religious impulse, but to me it is simpler than that. It is summed up in the image of a person at sundown, watching the crimson flowering of the sky and saying--to somebody—“Thank you.””

Saying thank you may be at the origins of religion. Studies show that it may also be good for you.

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