

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**Thanksgiving – November 22, 2017**  
**Luke 17:11-19**

*Holy Spirit of God, may the refining fire of your love reach into our hidden,  
inmost places and make us one spirit with you. Amen.*

This evening, we celebrate a service of thanksgiving. All over the internet this week, amid the tsunami of celebrity updates and political opinion pieces, are also articles, blog posts, and memes about thanksgiving and gratitude. Some are quite lovely and inspired...others are banal. Too often, what I see are barely more than slogans. Short, pithy, and memorable, they also seem to me overly-simplified and manipulative. They state the obvious in the most thin and shallow way and with a catchy tag line. One of the ones that has been rolling around my head for several days now has been “attitude of gratitude.” As in, “you’ve got to develop an attitude of gratitude.” That, conventional wisdom and the blogosphere says, is the key to happiness.

The purveyors of gratitude happiness promise that following 5 easy steps, one can cultivate a thankful disposition and, thus, find the true happiness that has been as yet elusive. It is not that this is untrue, for feeling grateful and possessing a disposition of gratitude may, in fact, be a significant key to happiness. But happiness is a fleeting thing. It is an emotion...it comes and it goes. Will an attitude of gratitude be enough to lead to something more enduring, like joy? In pursuing the sweet simplicity of an attitude of gratitude, are we missing the more nourishing complexity of faith and thankfulness?

Maybe it is my contrarian nature, but I tend to get irritated when I hear these sayings. In the face of all the difficulties and challenges in this fragile, sinful, and mortal life, an “attitude of gratitude” seems like thin protection and hardly provocative enough to stimulate the change of heart necessary to live a faithful and joyful life.

In his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul exhorts us with these gentle and yet challenging words: In all things, give thanks and praise. How do we do this? To whom or what do we gift our thanks and praise? Too often in this world of independent self-made and self-focused men and women, without realizing it, we offer this gratitude to ourselves. We tell each other that life is what you make of it; your attitude determines your experience. Could this sort of gratitude and self-congratulation that we see worshiped on the altars of our culture be what Paul means? Or is the life of thanksgiving and praise to which we are called grounded in deeper, richer, and more challenging soil?

Our gospel lesson for Thanksgiving holiday is the story of the ten lepers that approach Jesus for healing. Now, as a side note, I must tell you that every time I read aloud this lesson from the Gospel of Luke, I have to be very careful. I don’t know if you noticed, but when I got to the second sentence about the “ten lepers” who approached Jesus, I slowed down a bit. I have to be very intentional in reading that line because the very first time I proclaimed that the lesson in worship as a new priest, I read, “As he entered a village, ten leopards approached him.” Worse yet, I got tickled by that and I smiled and started to giggle. I thought, “Whoops! I wonder if anyone noticed. Maybe not.” And so I tried to recompose my face. After I returned the gospel book to the altar and approached the pulpit to preach, I thought, “Who am I kidding?” and opened my sermon with, “Well, leopards totally change this story!” I mean, can you imagine Jesus being approached by 10 leopards?

But back to our Gospel lesson.... Keeping their distance, the ten lepers call out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” The text then notes that Jesus saw them and sent them to show themselves to the priests, and along the way, they were made clean. When one of them, the Samaritan, realized that he was healed, he stopped, turned around and returned to Jesus, praising God with a loud voice. Jesus receives him and then sends him on his way, saying that “your faith has made you well.” In this lesson, Jesus effectively equates faith with thankfulness: to practice gratitude is to practice faith. And through the man’s faithful expression of gratitude, he was made whole.

For some, this lesson can be difficult. Many of us have wounds and ailments – physical, emotional, or spiritual – that never seem to heal, the suffering persists no matter how much thanksgiving and prayer we offer. We must remember that these are stories used to illustrate a truth about the nature of God and our relationship to God. The truth revealed here is not so much that having or living faith will heal us of all our ailments, rather that living a life of faith will transform our experience of human, mortal life, leading to a life that may be experienced as a joy-filled and blessed even in the face of our own fragility and suffering.

In this story, being thankful is not a precondition for being healed by Jesus, for all the lepers find themselves cleansed. But this one man, this Samaritan, does something different – he turns around and comes back. It is this turning and returning that is important here. True healing comes not from saying thank you but from the radical turning of one’s life in a new direction, and returning one’s attention and praise away from self and towards the source of all grace, all beauty, all goodness, and all blessing.... God.

In Luke’s gospel in particular, and in the New Testament in general, “turning around” as a description for the believer’s reaction to Jesus’ work is certainly no coincidental action, but one filled with deep theological meaning. It refers to a movement of the whole person – body, mind, and soul. It is a radical redirection of the whole self to a new direction for our source of joy. When Jesus says “your faith has made you well”, he refers to not just the medical cure or physical healing but to the holistic healing of this human being. This man’s body has been cleansed, yes, but he has also been restored to right relationship with God and himself, living the fully human life as intended by his Creator.

“Repent and return to the Lord” – we hear this over and over again in our scriptures. The word “repentance” doesn’t necessarily mean penitence (or some sort of self-negation and flagellation), as we often think. The word repentance comes here refers to a transformative change of heart that leads to a fundamental change in thinking and living. I knew a pastor who defined this as “turning in a new direction for your source of happiness.” Contemplatives have often regarded this as an inward shift away from self and toward God. In this way, repentance is not something that you possess or not, rather something you practice....over and over again, turning around and returning to God. Turning around and coming back.

And this turning and returning is made evident when we live lives of gratitude; when we live Eucharistic lives – lives of thanksgiving, sacrifice, and praise. This is the life for which we are created and to which God continually calls us to return – lives that reflect our awareness of God working through us and through all things: the blessings and disappointments; health and illnesses; joys and sorrows. Working through all things – renewing, restoring, bringing forth new life in surprising ways.

For some of us, myself included, this truth can be hard to embrace. Sometimes it takes great suffering to weaken us such that we are able to recognize and experience the spirit of God flowing through all things and all situations: the good and the difficult. In my life, this has

looked like coming to the end of my rope and having no choice but to let go and fall into the abyss, only to realize that I won't fall forever – that God is the unseen but certain ground of my being. Much of the joyfulness I now live has come as a result from my lived experience of God working through my suffering.

In our worship tonight and after we leave here, may we praise God, from whom all blessings flow, not only in our hearts and with our mouths, but also with our lives. This season of Thanksgiving, may we develop eyes that see and recognize the ways in which God is moving through our lives renewing, restoring, and making whole. And when we do, may we have the presence of mind to turn around and return to the Lord, praising God with a loud voice, for we will indeed be blessed.

Amen. Alleluia, alleluia!