

LIVING BY GRATITUDE

Luke 17:11-19

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

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I should say up front that this story of the healing of the ten lepers is one of my favorite Biblical stories. Across forty-some years of regular preaching, I suppose I have preached on this text more than on any text other than, say, the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, which is the assigned reading for every Christmas Eve. And the reason I find this text so important is that no Biblical text is more foundational to my understanding of stewardship than this text, because I believe no factor more determines our stewardship than gratitude.

The actual story is straightforward. Ten lepers come to Jesus asking for mercy – ten outcasts because of a disease that drove them to the outskirts of society. Jesus offers them mercy by sending them to the priests for ritual purification and re-entry into the community. And they go, and as they go, all of them are healed. Then, one of them, a Samaritan, a foreigner, notices something. He sees that he has been healed, and he is overcome... and so he turns on his heels and races back to the feet of Jesus, where he falls on his face before the one who has healed him and given him back his life.

That's it – a simple story. Yet, it leaves for its hearers unanswered questions – questions not so much about the story itself but about those of us who hear it. I find that I am left with two particularly haunting questions at the story's conclusion:

The world is full of gracious gifts, but will I *notice*?
If I notice, how then will I *choose* to live?

Truthfully, those two questions are foundational questions for all Christian life, because our faith affirms that the fundamental fact about our lives is grace. In love, God reaches out to help, heal and restore us. God's love is expansive, abundant, full of grace. Yet, according to this story, the odds are about nine to one that we won't get it.¹ And what a shame that is, because an awareness of grace can change one's attitudes and relationships – and one's capacity for joy – even in less than optimal circumstances.

Some years back I heard an essay that singer-songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter recorded for the "This I Believe" segment of NPR's Morning Edition – an essay she wrote after suffering a life-threatening pulmonary embolism. She told of a "terrible breathlessness" and chest pain that landed her in the ER one night, and of her subsequent hard decisions to cancel an upcoming tour and let valued musicians go while she recuperated. Over the ensuing weeks and months, all of her attempts to see the time off as a gift were met by a deepening and spiraling depression, until one day.

¹ Keith Nickle, "Ten Lepers Cleansed," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2000, 50.

Sometimes, it's the smile of a stranger that helps. [Or] a phone call from a long-absent friend, checking on you. I found *my* lifeline at the grocery store. One morning, the young man who rang up my groceries and asked me if I wanted paper or plastic also told me to enjoy the rest of my day. I looked at him and I knew he meant it. It stopped me in my tracks. I went out and I sat in my car and cried.

What I want more than ever is to appreciate that I have this day, and tomorrow, and hopefully days beyond that. I am experiencing the learning curve of gratitude. I don't want to say "have a nice day" like a robot. I don't want to get mad at the elderly driver in front of me. I don't want to go crazy when my Internet access is messed up. I don't want to be jealous of someone else's success. You could say that this litany of sins indicates that I don't want to be human. The learning curve of gratitude, however, is showing me exactly how human I am.... I wonder how it took me my entire life to [learn to] appreciate just one day.²

Maybe such wonder and puzzlement struck the tenth leper, the one who turned around and came back to Jesus. After such a long experience of vulnerability and exclusion, he was suddenly face to face with the grace and possibilities in his life. Maybe he noticed the grace and decided to begin to exhibit some grace and gratitude of his own.

Now, lifting up that one leper is not to cast aspersions on the other nine, who made a different choice. I can only imagine how overwhelming the experience of healing could be for them. Barbara Sholis writes:

I am sure the lepers were speechless, overwhelmed with the shock of disbelief at their good fortune. One moment they were living a dreadful, diseased, quarantined existence, and then, in the time it took to walk to the village priest, their skin healed, their vision cleared, their sores dried up. The local priest sounded the "all clear," freeing them to return to society, to their homes, to productive lives. If you think about your own probable reaction, it is hard to blame the lepers for scattering to the wind and leaving the past behind them like a bad dream.

But Luke tells us that ... the Samaritan... upon seeing before his eyes the miraculous healing of his body, is overcome with gratitude. He turns back to thank Jesus. We know from his loud voice, his falling flat on his face at [Christ's] feet, that even his body cannot contain his praise and thanksgiving.³

Luke scholar John Carroll says, "The point toward which this story presses is doxology."⁴ And it does; it points us toward praise and gratitude before the remarkable

² "The Learning Curve of Gratitude," by Mary Chapin Carpenter. NPR's Morning Edition, *This I Believe*. June 24, 2007. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11182405>, accessed January 29, 2019.

³ Barbara Sholis, "Stay the Course," *Christian Century*, October 5, 2004, 20.

⁴ John Carroll, *Between Text and Sermon: Luke 17:11-19*, *Interpretation*, October 1999, 407.

grace of God. Yet, doxology and gratitude are still, as Mary Chapin Carpenter said, a learning curve. And thus, my questions still remain:

The world is full of gracious gifts, but will I notice?
If I notice, how then will I choose to live?

As important as stewardship season is for the life of the church – and it *is* important – stewardship is about so much more than how big a pledge we will make for the next year. That pledge will be a by-product. Stewardship is about finding answers to the crucial questions about what we notice, about choosing to live in some manner that honors and gives tangible expression to what we have seen and heard. Our investment of time, energy, and resources in the life of the church are among the ways we give such expression, and there are many people, both within and beyond our number, who stand to benefit substantially if we do so. Gratitude and doxology can unlock so much in our lives, once we see... once we notice the grace that is all around us. Of course, not everyone notices... but it is an amazing thing to witness when one does.

There's a wonderful story about a Wynton Marsalis concert some years ago over at the Village Vanguard – one of New York's premier jazz clubs. Marsalis was performing a song called, "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You." He was playing the trumpet, and the audience was sitting in awe of his [artistry]. As one writer described it, Marsalis "performed the song in murmurs and sighs, at points nearly talking the words in notes. It was a wrenching act of creative expression. When he reached the climax, Marsalis played the final phrase, the title statement, in declarative tones, allowing each successive note to linger in the air a bit longer. "I don't stand. . . a ghost. . . of. . . a... chance...." And just as he was about to reach the powerful conclusion of the song, [CELL PHONE RINGING], that happened.

Wynton Marsalis stopped playing. The offending audience member ran for the door, and the rest of the crowd didn't know how to react. A few people laughed awkwardly, but mostly there was silence. At that moment, Marsalis might have stormed off-stage, raged at the offending audience member... could have done just about anything and everyone would have understood. Instead, he paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched.

Then, he started to play again. But he didn't play the song he had been playing. Instead, he played the tune from the cell phone. He then improvised variations on the cell phone tune, before finally transitioning flawlessly back into the conclusion of the original song. He finished to a thunderous ovation, not just because of his skill playing the original song, but because of the way he was able to improvise on such short notice.⁵

⁵ As shared initially by Steve Kennedy, an elder at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill; later I found an account on a blog post: <http://theoccasionalceo.blogspot.com/2010/03/little-improvisation.html>, accessed January 28, 2019.

As I have shared here before, Paul Duke once said that gratitude and praise are the “jazz factors” of faith – indeed, that praise is *love improvising its answer to love*.⁶ I think that is what happened with the Samaritan leper – an improvisational act of praise and gratitude in response to God’s grace. He noticed the grace that had come his way; it turned him around and set him on an improvisational path of gratitude. In my life I have had the privilege of witnessing others who wonderfully embraced such improvisation.

When I’m at my best, I too can improvise such praise. When I’m at my best, even simple daily occurrences can stir gratitude: a glimpse of sunlight breaking through the gray skies, a warm bowl of oatmeal on a wintry morning, a safe arrival after a hair-raising cab ride from LaGuardia, an unexpected act of kindness, a morsel of bread and a tiny cup of juice. When I’m at my best, I can improvise praise and gratitude in such moments.

At other times I find my senses dulled by routines, or my conscious thoughts consumed by anxiety, by pettiness and envy, by expectation or demand. In those days I do well simply to do what is required of me. By “what is required,” I mean the commands of God for faithfulness, for treating others with respect, for demonstrating kindness to my neighbor. Sometimes the requirements seem like burden and demand.

But I long to live by gratitude, to spend my days improvising praise! I aspire to such a life. It’s a lifelong learning curve, I know. And I know I’m not the only one who seeks such a life. I’m in league with Mary Chapin Carpenter and with countless others who have noticed the way life is full of gracious gifts and who want to choose a life that bears evidence of what we’ve noticed. I want to live generously, graciously, as a result.

Alan Culpepper [asks], “Are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay and for which we often fail to be grateful? Here is a barometer of spiritual health: although gratitude is not synonymous with faith, neither [faith nor gratitude] can be separated from the other.”

The tenth leper’s faithful, untainted gratitude for God’s mercy is humbling to see. He realizes that life is a gift, that just to get up each day is windfall.⁷

How will you improvise your response to such a windfall? What can we learn from the story of the ten lepers? In part, at least, we learn that the healing and restorative grace of God is a gift, given out of an abundance of love. It is pure gift. Gratitude, on the other hand, is a choice. It is a way of life, a manner of living, one that can claim you in your humanity, change your whole perspective, and magnify the gifts you’ve been given... *if* you notice... and *if* you choose.

⁶ Paul D. Duke, "Down the Road and Back," *Christian Century*, September 27-October 4, 1995, 883.

⁷ Sholis, *op. cit.*