**What Do Disciples ~~Believe~~ Do**

**“Disciples Give Thanks”**

OT 28C-16

Luke 17: 11-19

Oct. 9, 2016

**Prayer for Illumination**

God of abundant hope,

There is so much that deserves our thanks.

So many blessings, such great presence.

Here and now, we give thanks for your word, and pray that your Spirit would

Be within its proclamation, as well as our hearing.

May what we hear and how we respond lead us closer to who you’d have us be. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Luke 17: 11-19**

On the way to Jerusalem

Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

As he entered a village,

ten lepers approached him.

Keeping their distance,

they called out, saying,

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

“Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

And as they went,

they were made clean.

Then one of them,

when he saw that he was healed,

turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.

And he was a Samaritan.

Then Jesus asked,

“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?”

Then he said to him,

“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

The Path to Joy: Part 2

“Greedy 🡪 Grateful 🡪 Generous”

This morning, we continue in our two-part sermon series… making our way through what Scripture identifies as the path to joy.

We began, last week, at the point society tells us to begin—amid our propensity towards greed. We admitted, it’s hard to ignore all the marketers hammering us until we bend to the lie that our worth is tied to what we have or what we make. Just as we confessed our tendency to accept society’s insistence that we live in an economy of scarcity… that there’s not enough for you and me and everybody in between so better make sure you get yours.

Jesus understood this all too well… which is why he spoke so often about money and wealth… warning us to “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

As we shared, **it’s not that material wealth is inherently bad—it isn’t. Money isn’t bad. But our idolization of it is… as our idolization of material wealth creates appetites within us for more… leading us to believe** that greed is actually good. That greed leads to success and happiness.

* Even though greed always demands… “there isn’t enough.”
* Even though greed always insists… “you better get more.”
* Even though greed never, ever lets us rest to take stock of all the blessings we *already* have… so we can appreciate the joy and gifts that are ours to celebrate here and now.

Greed never wants us to do that . Because once we appreciate what we have… greed has lost its power.

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It’s why Jesus spent so much of his ministry not just warning people about the destructive nature of greed… but calling people to lives founded on gratitude. Gratitude not in the sense of simply saying thanks for something you’re handed… like in a quid pro quo transaction. No. That’s transactional gratitude… and not what we’re talking about here.

Rather… the Gospel understanding of gratitude revolves around the practice of looking for and giving thanks for the gifts that are around us… even within us… gifts we didn’t earn or create ourselves… but gifts we’ve received just the same… These are what’s known as gifts of grace. Like

* the gift of life and the breaths of air we took upon rising this morning
* the gift of family and friends with whom we give and receive love and share in the joys and pains of life together
* the gift of faith and a relationship with the One who not only created us… and provides for us… but who promises to love us each and every step we take through this life into the next.
* And so much more.

The gospel makes clear… *this* practice of gratitude is not only our greatest antidote to greed… but also our surest way to see… and finally live into the joy God yearns for us to find.

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There’s actually quite a bit of scientific research that demonstrates the point.

Robert Emmons is a professor of psychology at the University of California, and one of the world’s leading scientific experts on the practice of gratitude. Amid his research with thousands of subjects ages 8 through 80, Emmons has demonstrated that the practice of gratitude is connected with improved physical and emotional qualities of life.

For example, they’ve demonstrated that, in comparison to those who don’t practice gratitude… those who DO practice gratitude tend to have stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure, healthier sleep patterns, and a reduction in aches and pains.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Emmons has also demonstrated that those who regularly practice gratitude report having more social connections to other people, and experiencing more optimism and happiness during the day. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Now… there’s not enough time to really dig through all of these findings in depth… But I do share this:

1. First, Emmons claims gratitude is such a positive force for people because it helps us **celebrate the present**—something greed never does, right? He notes that, in celebrating what we already have, “gratitude helps us… appreciate the value of something (more than we otherwise would)… *And* when we appreciate the value of something more, we extract more benefits from it, and are less likely to take it for granted.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In this way, he explains, the practice of “gratitude allows us to (actually) participate more in (our lives). (Gratitude equips us to be) more present in the now by noticing more of the positive things around us… (And as we do) our feelings of pressure increase… as our feelings of stress and anxiety decrease.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. And he explains the decrease in negative emotions buy pointing out something that’s rather obvious but also important to note. Namely, we can’t be both envious and grateful at the same time. Just as we can’t be full of anger or resentment if we’re full of gratitude. The practice of gratitude leads us into emotions and perspective that are simply incongruent with negative perspectives that have detrimental effects on us.[[5]](#footnote-5)

So in both a physiological and psychological way… gratitude is good for us.

Or, as Jesus says in our Gospel lesson this morning, gratitude is what makes us well… or whole.

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And our lesson this morning is, indeed, such a beautiful one. In his work, “Returning Thanks,” Paul Thigpen retells our Gospel lesson about the healing of the lepers in his own words. He writes:

*Each one of the ten had a tale of personal horror to tell, but the stories were all the same.*

*The nightmare had crept slowly across their bodies: white patches, lumps in the skin. Then the numbness had crawled up their limbs, stealing the feeling from fingers and toes. Finally, the faces had grown disfigured beyond recognition, and all that remained of the feet were crippled nubs.*

*Worst of all were the jeers from the children whenever the men passed too near a village. “Lepers!” they screamed, spitting the word like a curse.*

*So long ago these ten had been young and handsome, healthy and well-to-do, full of desires and dreams. But that seemed like another world, another lifetime. Now they were the walking dead.*

*One morning, as they approached yet another village to beg, the crowds were cheering the name that for months had spread like a whispered wildfire through the leper colony: Jesus.*

*The leper-healer from Nazareth stood by the village well, not far from the twisted outcasts. And He was looking their way.*

*All at once ten hoarse voices erupted in unison: “Jesus! Master! Have pity on us!”*

*He smiled – the first smile turned in their direction for many years – and said simply, “Go show yourselves to the priests.”*

*He hadn’t even touched them. The ten examined one another. Clearly, nothing had changed. Were they once again the butt of a cruel joke?*

*One of them, a Samaritan, turned back to the road, set his face toward Jerusalem and the temple, and motioned for his comrades to join him. “If the priests throw me out,” he said, “then let the crowds stone me. What’s left to live for?”*

*He hobbled down the dusty path, his crutch making holes in the scorched clay. And as the others followed, the miracle came. They were cleansed. Suddenly. Totally. Unconditionally.*

*Nine men shouted and raced down the road like boys in a game, peeling off their rags to welcome the sunshine on their now childlike skin. They never… looked back, never saw again the face whose light had dawned on their darkness and ended their nightmare. But one man – the Samaritan – spun around, ran to Jesus, and flung himself at His feet. Tears spilled down cleansed cheeks. He looked up, trembling, and whispered two words.*

*“Thank you.”*[[6]](#footnote-6)

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Thank you. Two small, simple words. But according to Jesus, they’re two of the most powerful words we wield.

For when the cleansed Samaritan uttered those words to Jesus, it was only then Jesus told him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” All ten had been healed… but only the one who expressed gratitude was told… “Your faith—or your gratitude—has made you whole. For your faith—your gratitude—has led you to uncover the kingdom of God… wherein you’re blessed with gifts you can’t make or earn… but receive just the same.”

As we shared last week, gratitude is not just an emotion. It is also… a perspective. Even an ethic. Something we not only see and feel… but a way in which we live.

As Diana Butler Bass explains in her book titled “Grateful,” the kind of gratitude Jesus revealed “is a disposition that must be chosen and cultivated… (It’s) an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions. ***(Which means) gratitude involves not just what we feel*** ***but (also) what we do***…. It’s both a noun and a verb.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Or… said another way… gratitude—real gratitude—demands expression. Our gratitude must be expressed if it’s to shape us in any real way.

Which makes sense, right? I mean:

* Are you really grateful for a gift if you never express thanks to the one who gave it?
* Or are you actually thankful for a blessing you received if you don’t let that gratitude move you… form you… shape you in some way?
* Or… conversely… have you ever regretted telling someone how much they meant to you? Or how grateful you are to someone for simply being in your life?

It’s why the gospel is perpetually pointing us not to simply saying thank you… but to actually practice it… until we learn to embody our gratitude on a daily basis.

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One way Christians have been doing this throughout the ages is to keep a gratitude journal… It’s a discipline of reflecting upon all you have to give thanks for in a given day… and writing it down. I think it’s a beautiful practice that works for many. But in all transparency… writing things down at the end of the day is not for me.

Others try to find one person—any person—every single day and tell them what they mean to them. I like that one.

But universally—and without parallel—the clearest and greatest expression of gratitude we know… the one research backs up in significant ways… is the connection between gratitude… and generosity. And how the practice of being grateful… finds its fullest expression amid the practice of generosity.

* The generosity of our patience—as we love even those who try ours.
* The generosity of our attention—as we focus on someone who needs our time, even when we have little to give.
* The generosity of our mercy—as we forgive one who harmed us.
* The generosity of our care—as we tend to those in want or need, whether we know them or not.
* And yes… dear friends. We must include the generosity of our resources—as we spend what we have to spread God’s blessings unto all.

Not surprisingly, as we talk frequently in the church about the joy to be found in generosity, there have been numerous studies demonstrating the link between generosity and joy. And I don’t disagree with these results.

But to bring it all home… I think the greater link between giving and joy is bound up in gratitude’s link to why we give in the first place. **Namely, it is only when we are truly grateful for what we have that we can give without counting the cost. And it is only when we give without counting the cost that we are able to find the true joy of generosity.**

Which… when you think about where we began this journey… is about as far away from greed as we can possibly be, right? Rather than believing the lie that there isn’t enough and seeking more for ourselves… rather than accepting the falsehood that our worth is found in what we have… the joy of God’s kingdom is found when we are so grateful for what we have that we end up giving ourselves away.

From Greed… to gratitude… to generosity… to joy.

It may sound hard or implausible. But try it.

* Make a point of telling someone what they mean to you every day.
* Try telling someone thank you—not because they gave you something you paid for… but because they blessed you in a way that touched you.
* Try reflecting on seemingly mundane gifts you pass by every day… but are, in all actuality, the most important gifts of life we have… Like food… and shelter… running water… community… family… friends… purpose…
* Try living into a perpetual awareness that the all-powerful God… Creator of the Universe… refuses to be God without you. Because God loves you… and claims you… equips you… and calls you.

Pick up the discipline, dear friends, of gratitude and generosity for a month… heck… a week. I dare you. And uncover the path that leads to joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Robert Emmons, Why Gratitude Is Good | Greater Good (berkeley.edu), www.greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\_gratitude\_is\_good [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Paul Thigpen, “Returning Thanks -Twelve ways to cultivate a thankful heart,” *Discipleship Journal,* Issue #78 November/December 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Diana Butler Bass, [Diana Butler Bass: Gratitude isn't just an emotion | Faith and Leadership](https://faithandleadership.com/diana-butler-bass-gratitude-isnt-just-emotion) https://faithandleadership.com/diana-butler-bass-gratitude-isnt-just-emotion [↑](#footnote-ref-7)