

Sermons at Christ Church

Lord, Make Me An Instrument Of Your Peace.

Pentecost XVIII

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Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Asked the bewildered Jesus who had just healed ten lepers. It is most likely that because of their leprosy, for which they would have been considered unclean, these lepers had been banished from their town, their families, friends and neighbors.

From a distance they called out to Jesus “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” The compassionate Jesus heard their cry and asked them to go and show themselves to the priest. An ask which was quite unusual because these people still had leprosy. But they took off anyway, to see the priest. On their way, all ten realized that they had been healed. Amazing, right?

But this is the part where the story gets a little more interesting. When they realized that they had been healed, one of them, a Samaritan didn’t continue the journey to see the priest, he returns back to Jesus with joy. He gives praises to God and thanks Jesus for the healing he had just experienced in his life.

But Jesus is curious. He asked a simple but a most profound question-it is a question that recognizes the barrier between our sense of gratitude and a sense if entitlement.

Scripture doesn’t reveal the identities of the other nine lepers-but that doesn’t matter. What matters is whether those people held within themselves that spirit of gratitude which recognizes a gift, an underserved gift, and whether those people had the capacity within themselves to give thanks for the undeserved gift that they had received.

What often sets the faithful person apart from all others is that sense of gratitude, that sense of thankfulness which springs up, not from a place of pride-because pride deceives us into thinking more of ourselves than we need to. What sets the faithful person apart is the sense of gratitude that recognizes God’s generosity.

A sense of gratitude that comes from a place of deep recognition that I cannot or couldn't have achieve my station in life-whatever station it is: I got the healing I wanted, the job I have been looking for, the family I have always wanted, the struggles I have had, a career and even some failures, and the gift of life itself by myself alone, and that the grace of God had made possible all that which I deemed to be impossible.

In our Old Testament story, we read about a little girl who had been captured in Israel by the Arameans and taken on a long journey to a foreign land. She lived her days serving Naaman's household. This little girl was held against her will, from her family, her people and community. But the fact that she was virtually a slave in Naaman's household, did not stop her from wondering about her master Naaman. Her station in life did not stop her from caring about her master Naaman. She was likely aware of the shame, isolation and the enormous burden that Naaman carried with him.

Considering the status of her own life, and her place in Naaman's household, she didn't have to do lift a finger to help Naaman. She could simply have watched Naaman suffer under the burden of his leprosy. But some way, somehow, she knew that the generosity of the God of Israel is deeply offensive. It is offensive in the sense that it is not only far-reaching, but it touches those we deem unfit to even benefit from that generosity. This God's generosity does not sample between human categories, it touches the saint and the sinner alike, and reaches out to the Jew and even Naaman the Aramean, and oh that generosity which touches both the one Samaritan and the other nine lepers. It is an offensive generosity that is compelling enough to generate gratitude in us.

This little girl did not only see the possibilities of new life for her master, she saw a master living life to the fullest. She pondered over the burden of her master, she thought about the disease everyone knew but no one dared to talk about. She cared about her master so much so that this little girl dared to say the unsayable-if only my master knew of the prophet in Samaria. In other words if only my master knew what I know about the God of Israel-the God who is gracious and full of compassion, the God whose generosity is deeply offensive and so could touch people like Naaman who had caused so much pain to God's people.

What we need to remember is that we are not entitled to God's generosity. Any feeling of being entitled diminishes the importance of the grace of God's offensive generosity towards us.

Naaman's problem was his sense of entitlement. He thought that because he was a successful commander of the king's army, the prophet would come out, pay him homage and then call upon the Lord his God to cure his leprosy. It was as if he was deserving of the healing he wanted-but that is not so with God.

He got offended because the prophet wouldn't come out. His sense of himself, his hubris was such that he'd rather walk away with his ailment than humble himself to do the simple act that the prophet asked of him.

I cannot tell if it was out of hubris that the other nine did not return to Jesus to offer their thanks. But what I can say is that one of the dangers of pride is that it creates within us a sense of entitlement-that we are entitled to whatever gift that we receive.

The problem with feeling entitled is that it diminishes our sense of gratitude. And you can never praise nor find any zest for life or fulfillment in life if you are incapable of being grateful-if you cannot take time to recognize, appreciate and give thanks for even the ants you see on the trail.

There is a story of Adam and Mark. Adam complained to Mark that he had lost his zest for life. Life isn't worth it. He had done the little that he thought he could do but everything seems so mundane and rote. There's no point to life and I might as well die quickly or I might kill myself

Mark was so surprised. You mean there's no point to life? Let me give you an exercise. It is a one-hundred-day exercise. First, get yourself a journal. And from today, before you go to bed, I need you to write down anything that you saw for which you are grateful. Adam was not all too pleased. Is that all you have to say in response to my complaint? He said. Mark responded, you simply complete the task, and when you are done, we can have a chat.

Adam then began the task of writing down the stuff for which he was grateful. He quickly he realized he was running out of stuff for which he was grateful, and because he had to find something every day, he simply could not take a cursory look at life. He had to be intentional about finding something. He would write, I am grateful for the ants that I saw on the trail. After the hundredth day, Adam had not only been enriched by that experience but realized how much he had missed in life because he was paying attention to the wrong things. His self-absorption had rendered him incapable of being grateful for even his own life.

The point here is that you have to be intentional about gratitude. Gratitude is not simply captured in words, it is captured in acts. Listen to Henri Frederic Amiel “Thankfulness is the beginning of gratitude. Gratitude is the completion of thankfulness. Thankfulness may consist merely of words. Gratitude is shown in acts.” This is the act we see from Naaman and the Samaritan-both went back to give thanks for their healing.

When transformation happens, our longings cease and joy takes over our lives. That when we sing with indescribable joy. Karl Barth said that “Joy is the simplest form of gratitude.” And I can feel the joy of both Naaman and the Samaritan.

You and I also long for community, we long for affirmation, we long for wholeness, we long for a space that offers solace, hope and renewal. We long for a fulfilling life, we long for a community where we can truly belong, we long for new life; a life full of meaning and purpose. We long for a place where we can fully express our sense of gratitude for God’s offensive generosity.

As we begin our Stewardship campaign, I’d like to thank you for the many ways in which you bless this community of faith with your sense of gratitude. You haven’t given up on Christ Church because you know that giving up diminishes any potential for growth, transformation, and the pursuit of your vision for this place.

And so this morning, the question is, do you consider yourself as part of the nine or you see yourself as the Samaritan or Naaman, who after experiencing God’s offensive generosity came running back with hearts full of gratitude and praise?

If there's one hope that I have for this place and our world, it is one where we can teach children how to live grateful lives. It is one where we can teach each other how to sing of God's goodness and God's generosity-and that means we never ever feel entitled to anything. And that's why we have to keep grateful hearts and live grateful lives. In my mind that's what makes all the difference in our lives. Amen.