***THE EXCEPTION OR THE RULE?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

October 13, 2019

Texts: Luke 17:11-19 and Psalm 66:1-5, 16-20

 Last Sunday I began my sermon by asking: How much faith do you have? This week I want to pose another question that may seem to be unrelated to last week’s question – except that it isn’t: Are you a grateful person or are you ungrateful or just grumpy? Do you find something for which to be thankful on a daily basis, and do you then offer thanks, or are you only thankful in November as Thanksgiving approaches? In her book *Grateful*, Diana Butler Bass shares this quote from the Buddha:

*Let us rise up and be thankful,*

 *for if we didn’t learn a lot today, at least we learned a little,*

 *and if we didn’t learn a little, at least we didn’t get sick,*

 *and if we got sick, at least we didn’t die;*

 *so, let us all be thankful.*”[[1]](#endnote-1)

It seems like good advice that might have come from a Psalm or proverb or saying of Jesus. The Buddha seems to think that we all have something for which to be thankful, even if it is just one more life-giving breath, and thus commends gratitude as a way of life. Is your gratitude that great or that small or is it non-existent? Are you thankful for the little things you learned today, for the health you enjoy (even if it is not wholly enjoyable), for every breath that you take, or at least for being alive yet another day? Can you find something – anything – for which to be thankful this day? (Which may prompt some of you to suggest: how about a short sermon?)

 In today’s Gospel reading Luke tells of Jesus’ encounter with ten lepers as he traveled between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. In the Bible leprosy is a catchall for a host of skin disorders and diseases; whether these ten suffered from true leprosy (known as Hansen’s Disease), or terminal poison ivy, or chronic acne, or just a bad case of psoriasis isn’t known. It really doesn’t matter, for the 1st century assumption was that the skin disease (whatever it was) was highly contagious; those afflicted were required to stay at a healthy distance from healthy folks so as not to infect them. So it was from a distance that these ten lepers called out to Jesus: *Master, have mercy upon us!* We might have expected them to cry: *Lord Jesus, heal us!* But their cry more closely echoed that of the prayer formulated by desert monks in the 5th century:

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,*

*have mercy on me, a sinner.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

 What do you pray when you pray, if you pray? Do you approach God with a list of what ails you and a plea for healing, or do you simply offer some version of that prayer of the lepers and desert monks, “*Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner!*”? God knows our needs even before we ask, says Jesus. Yet we are invited to ask God for what we want or need, to offer specifics in our petitions. There is no formulaic language that is required for God to discern our needs. Even a sigh can be a prayer that God understands, for God knows our hearts even better than we do! So while the ten lepers cried out, “Have mercy upon us!” Jesus understood what it was they were really asking for: healing and acceptance back into society.

 In many Gospel accounts of his healings Jesus touches the one to be healed – whether sick or lame or blind or even leprous – or he speaks a healing word like, “stand up and walk”. Even Elisha in his healing of the leprous Naaman has a servant tell the army commander to go wash in the muddy Jordan seven times. But here Jesus does none of those things; he just tells the lepers to go show themselves to the priests. By law the priests decided who was clean and who was unclean, who could reenter society and who was banished to the wilderness. Only the clean and healthy could expect favorable judgment from the priests. In telling the lepers to go and show themselves to the priests Jesus was assuring them of healing. Remarkably, they went. Perhaps their faith in Jesus was that great, or perhaps they thought it couldn’t hurt to do what he said, or perhaps they were desperate enough to try anything, but whatever their motivation, the ten lepers went to show themselves to the priests as Jesus had told them – and along the way, they were healed.

 Ten lepers were healed, but only one returned to offer thanks to the one who had healed them, only one offered resounding praise to God, only one acknowledged the gracious gift he had received. He was the exception – ten were healed, but only one gave thanks. Where were the other nine? Did they not recognize who had healed them? Were they not grateful? Were they too busy making plans for the new life they had been given? Did they simply forget? Or did they believe that it would be enough to send a hand-written thank-you note to Jesus as their southern mothers had taught them? The question is not just ours; it was Jesus’ question as well. Where were the other nine?

 If this story makes you squirm at all, perhaps it is because the sandals of the nine fit more comfortably on your feet than do those of the one. The nine represent the rule – accepting God’s gift and going on their merry way, taking for granted the extraordinary gift of healing and new life, taking no time to offer to God thanks and praise. The exception is the one leper who returned to thank Jesus and glorify God. Are you the exception or the rule when it comes to giving thanks?

 Diana Butler Bass suggests: “Gratitude is more than just an emotion. It is also a disposition that can be chosen and cultivated, an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions – it is an ethic.”[[3]](#endnote-3) It is a way of life that sees in the world things great and small that are gifts of God for which to give thanks. Elie Wiesel goes further, suggesting that gratitude is essential to our humanity. As he said in an interview with Oprah Winfrey:

*When a person doesn’t have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude…For me every hour is grace. And I feel gratitude in my heart each time I can meet someone and look at his or her smile.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

It is not just in the big things of life, but also in the little things, that we are blessed, little things that we often take for granted. Faith is the lens through which we recognize the hand of God bestowing those blessings. If we are so blessed by God, then some response of gratitude seems appropriate or even essential. As the Native American proverb suggests: “*If you see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies in yourself.”* Are you a grateful person like the leper who returned to give thanks for his healing?

 There is one more noteworthy thing about that grateful leper – he was a Samaritan. Samaritans were neither Jew nor Gentile. They traced their lineage to the Northern Kingdom of Israel which split from the Southern Kingdom of Judah sometime after the reign of King Solomon. They did not practice many of the Jewish rituals which were rooted in the Southern Kingdom. Samaritans rejected the southern prophets and Jerusalem as God’s holy city. Jews regarded them as outcasts, violators of the faith and holy traditions. Yet, says Luke, it was the Samaritan who returned to give thanks, the foreigner least likely in Jewish eyes to offer to God thanks and praise, who returned to bow at Jesus’ feet and thank him.

 Faith crosses all the boundaries we try to establish between ourselves and others; it tears down the walls we build to define who is *in* and who is *out*, for the Lord God made us all! There is no *us* and *them*, no favorites and foreigners, for we are all children of God who owe to God our thanks and grateful praise. In healing the Samaritan leper Jesus affirmed his coming for ***all*** people, and in recognizing the faithful gratitude of that leper he cautions us about judging those who are different from us, those we might regard as outcasts or foreigners or immigrants or “other”. The Samaritan was the foreigner and a leper, but he alone set the example for us; he alone returned to give thanks, and he alone was blessed to hear those holy words of Jesus, “Your faith has made you well!”

 The Christian faith recognizes that our unity as brothers and sisters in Christ transcends all national boundaries, all ethnicities, all languages. It opposes nationalism that seeks to put country first and so divides people from one another. We are one in Christ. We owe a duty of love and care for all our brothers and sisters, and we join them in giving thanks to God for all that God has done and is doing and will yet do for us all, through us all, one and all.

 Are you a grateful person? For, God’s blessings are all around us and we are called to be exceptional, like the Samaritan leper, to give thanks in all things, in all places, with all people, for all our blessings, all the time. So

 *Let us rise up and be thankful,*

 *for if we didn’t learn a lot today, at least we learned a little,*

 *and if we didn’t learn a little, at least we didn’t fall asleep,*

 *and if we fell asleep, at least we didn’t hit our head on the pew;*

 *and if we hit our head on the pew, at least we didn’t die;*

 *so, let us all be thankful*”[[5]](#endnote-5) - exceptionally thankful! Amen

1. The Buddha quoted by Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, HarperOne:2018, p.80-81 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tony Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus?*, HarperOne:2015, p.258 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, HarperOne:2018, p.52 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Elie Wiesel in an interview with Oprah Winfrey quoted by Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, HarperOne:2018, p.44 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The Buddha quoted by Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, HarperOne:2018, p.80-81 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)