



Gratitude Is a Spiritual Practice

Luke 17.11-19

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For the past six weeks, we've been working our way through a series titled "Surrounded by Joy." Some weeks the connection to joy was easy to see. Other weeks it was less so. More than anything, my intent was to help us see joy through a variety of lenses. To remember that happiness and joy are two different things. Happiness is fleeting, but joy is persistent. Happiness is dependent upon outside circumstances, but joy is a chosen state of being.

And so we talked about the joy of being known by God, maybe even better than you know yourself. We talked about the joy of being found, no matter how lost you are or how you managed to get there. We talked about the joy that comes to us through friendship, about the difference friendship can make in our lives and the lives of others. We talked about the joy that hope brings in to our lives, and how it never gives up, not even on the hard days. We talked about the joy of community, about how it takes all of us for any of us to be our best selves. And today, we conclude this series talking about joy and gratitude.

The longer I have thought about it, the more convinced I have become this is the most important word the Bible has to offer us on the practice of gratitude, for all sorts of reasons,

including this: This is the only place in all of scripture where someone thanks Jesus.

I still find that a little incredible. Jesus, the Son of Man, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Good Shepherd, the true vine, the lamb of God, the one who time and time again points us toward life, pulls us up into the light, forgives us more often than we deserve, and heals us of our every ailment—only once does he hear, "Thank you." And it happens here, in today's Gospel reading.

It's a curious story. Ten lepers, all healed by Jesus. Nine of them obediently continue on their way, doing exactly as he told them, but one of them turns around and runs back, falling at Jesus' feet and saying, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Watching this happen, Jesus looks around, does the math, and asks where the other nine might be. "Why are you the only one who returned?" he says. And then he says. "Get up and go again on your way—your faith has made you well."

Which is great, but ... he's already been made well, hasn't he? Isn't that what turns around in the first place? Skin that is free of disease, a life that is free of isolation? His gratitude is not what heals him. It doesn't seem to make much sense—not until you poke around and remember our English translations

sometimes let us down. In verse 15, when the leper realizes he is clean, the verb used there refers to a *physical* healing. It's different in verse 19. The verb used there is "sozo," and translating "sozo" as "made well" is pretty weak. It's better and most often translated as "saved." To be saved. To be rescued. To be delivered. And always in a divine sense. Getting well from an illness is one thing. But *truly* getting well? Becoming whole? Being saved? That's another matter altogether.

Ten lepers have faith enough to ask Jesus to heal them — and he does. They were all healed. But only one is saved. The one that turns around to say, "Thank you. Thank you." So what is it about gratitude that saves us? It's got to be about more than just good manners, right? Don't get me wrong, I'm all for good manners. But it's more than that, right? Here is what I know with certainty: when I am grateful, I am a more joyful person.

Back when I was in high school, the only phone I had was still tethered to a wall and my watch did exactly two things: tell me what time it was and, if I pushed the right combination of buttons, function as a stopwatch, so I didn't just know I was a slow runner, I knew exactly how slow, down to a tenth of a second. But during a run one day, I hit the wrong combination of buttons, and I discovered my watch had a third function —it could chime on the hour. Every hour. Which initially drove me crazy, because it would jostle me out of whatever I was doing at the time. I couldn't figure out how to turn the hourly chime off, though, and after a few days of frustration, I can't remember who suggested it or if I thought of it myself, I don't know where the idea came from, but I decided to say a silent, one sentence statement of gratitude every time my watch beeped. So, every hour, a

prayer of thanksgiving for whatever I happened to be doing.

Sometimes it was easy. Watching a movie with friends? *Thank you, God, for these people.* Sitting in class? *Thank you, God, for this education.* Sometimes it was harder. Waiting in line at the DMV? *Thank you, God, for the chance to sit quietly, a little bit of forced rest.* While sick with the flu? *Thank you, God, for bodies that fight back against illness.* Fighting with my parents? *Thank you, God, that they care enough to argue.*

It sounds a little silly, and to be sure, there were more than a few times I missed the chime. But more often than not, I said a prayer of thanksgiving 10 to 12 times a day. And I know this beyond a shadow of a doubt: this practice changed me. It taught me that there is always — always — something to be grateful for.

I learned this in a different way from my friend Zoe. At the time, Zoe was three years old, and I was spending Thanksgiving with her and her family, who are some of my closest friends. The day after Thanksgiving, the kids begged to put up the Christmas tree, and the adults, realizing that we outnumbered the kids for a short while, decided this was strategically wise. We wrestled the tree into the living room and into its stand. The kids bounced on the couch, maintaining a safe distance but unable to contain their excitement. The lights went up, and the kids yelled, "Wow!" and then it was time to decorate.

My job was to attach the hooks to each ornament and then gently hand it to a child. "Be careful now," I warned them, "These are fragile and beautiful and we don't want to break them." I called Zoe over. I said, "Zoe, this one is for you," and put a sparkly silver ball in her hands. And Zoe, with lights shining behind her

and eyes opened wide, held it gently, and she whispered, "Thank you. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." Because they were three years old, this routine never got old, not once. Every ornament they took from my hands, the same words, hushed with wonder: "Thank you. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. "Thank you. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

I'm somewhat chagrined to tell you that about three-quarters of the way through the ornaments, I grabbed a wayward sock that was on the floor, striped with bright colors but dirty on the bottom from covering little feet. I placed it on an ornament hook and handed it over. "Thank you," Zoe said. "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." And she hung it on the tree. Her mother laughed at her. "Zoe," she said, "You just put your dirty sock on the tree. Are you even paying attention?" And Zoe looked at her and said, "But Mama, look — today, everything is beautiful. Even my sock!"

Zoe was paying attention, all right. Better than the rest of us, it turns out. I wonder if that's not the true secret behind gratitude. Not only is powerful enough to make you stop in your tracks, turn around, and throw yourself on the ground, it is powerful enough to change the way we see the world and everything in it. It unleashes in us an imagination that is nothing less than holy, the kind of imagination that hangs a sock on a tree and says it's beautiful. The kind of imagination that looks at swirling chaos, and says, This will be good, this will be very, very good. The kind of imagination that looks at a loaf of bread and a cup full of wine, and says it's an endless, joyful feast. The kind of imagination that looks at a beach full of

fishermen, and says, Okay, this will do. The kind of imagination that looks at a cross, and says, Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. The kind of imagination that looks at a sealed tomb and says, Life will burst forth. It unleashes in us an awareness of grace. That's the transformative work of gratitude, I think.

Gratitude puts the reality of grace right in front of our eyes, and that becomes the lens through which we see everything and everyone else. On our best days, that can change how we move through the world. It can save us.

Can saying thank you really make that much of a difference? It sounds awfully naive, even to me. But there is research now to back this up. Several studies indicate that regularly practicing gratitude actually has a positive impact on your physical health. Maybe that leper knew exactly what he was doing. Doctors at the University of Texas Health Science Center say, "a growing body of research shows that gratitude is truly amazing in its physical and psychosocial benefits."¹

And Brene Brown, a renowned sociologist, says, "In my 12 years of research on 11,000 pieces of data, I did not interview one person who had described themselves as joyful who did not actively practice gratitude. For me, it was very counterintuitive because I went into the research thinking that relationship between joy and gratitude was: if you are joyful, you should be grateful. But it wasn't that way at all. Instead, what I found was, practicing gratitude invites joy into our lives."² In other words, she says: "It's not joy that makes us grateful. It's gratitude that makes us joyful."

¹ "The Neuroscience of Why Gratitude Makes Us Healthier," Ocean Robbins, The Huffington Post, January 4, 2012.

² Brene Brown: globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/brene-brown-on-joy-and-gratitude/

And I believe this is true, because both my own experience and scripture itself tell me so. When we allow gratitude to shape our lives, we suddenly see the whole world shimmering with the presence of Love. It happened once day long ago, on the road between Samaria and Galilee. And you are some of the ones who have taught me to trust that it happens still today.

Which is why I want to thank you. Thank you for coming week after week, because this thing we do together, this worship we offer, it knits me back together, every time. It makes another week possible. Thank you. Thank you for the ways you live your faith. You listen to one another. You work to get along with one another. You work to get along with me, and Beverly, and Rebecca, and Andrew and Mary and Roger and all the rest of us. You stick with us even when a mistake is made. Being community together isn't always easy. But the daily effort of loving each other matters. Thank you.

Thank you for asking good questions. Thank you for teaching me about faith and trust. Thank you for taking risks and trying new things. Thank you for being peacemakers and healers and teachers and builders and caregivers and earth stewards. In your paid work and in your daily routine, at school and at home, you are filled with kindness and compassion, with a love of justice and desire for mercy. That matters. Thank you.

I think Jesus is right. Saying thank you can save our lives. It seems too simple, I know. But the world comes alive, and we do too, when gratitude shapes us and directs our steps. It opens our eyes and we see things that otherwise, we might have missed. Thank you for showing me that the kingdom of God is among

us, right now. Thank you. And thanks be to the One from whom all good gifts flow.