



Gratitude

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 14, 2007 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; II Timothy 28-15; and Luke 17:1-19.

The television series *ER* is in its 14th season making it the longest American primetime medical drama of all time. An “emergency” room by definition suggests that when you walk through its doors it’s because you are in trouble and something is very wrong. The ER physician's job is far more straightforward than that of many other specialists. ER doctors sew it up, hook it up, wrap it up, put it in a cast, send it upstairs for surgery, give it a pill or send it to the morgue. Once out of the ER, you are someone else's responsibility. Although ER physicians may save your life, you are not likely to get to know them like you do your primary care physician, and they will not get to know you. That piece is not part of their job.

The parallel is that the ER patient enjoys an unusual degree of anonymity. In many cases we like it that way. It spares us the discomfort of feeling too dependent upon another human being for our well-being. So the nine lepers healed on their way to Jerusalem responded to their restored health much as many of us would.

So, why did only one leper return to thank Jesus do you suppose? What follows are nine suggested reasons why the others did not return:

One waited to see if the cure was real.
One waited to see if it would last.
One said he would see Jesus later.
One decided that he had never had leprosy.
One said he would have gotten well anyway.
One gave the glory to the priests.
One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything."
One said, "Any rabbi could have done it."
One said, "I was already much improved."

--The NEWSLETTER, June, 1990, 3.

We smile because it comes a little close to home and we recognize an excuse when we see one. On a more serious note, we must suppose they were overjoyed and enthusiastic to be restored to health. They proceeded directly to the temple to see the priests who were invested with the authority to proclaim them cured, make them ritually clean once more, and restore them to the life of the community. Only the Samaritan recognizes that what he has experienced is physical healing and so much more. He experiences salvation.

The Samaritans thought of themselves as Jews. They were descendants of the line of Joseph and worshiped at what they believed to be the true center of faith at Mt. Gerizim. The rest of Judaism branded the Samaritans as Gentiles as if they were followers of another pagan religion.

So it is not entirely coincidental that the leper who comes back to Jesus is a Samaritan. Samaritans weren't *welcome* in the Temple in Jerusalem, as perhaps the tenth leper remembers as he sets out. Even after being cleansed of his leprosy, the tenth person will still be an outcast to Judeans. There's nothing he can do and nothing that Jesus can say that would integrate him fully into that society. And so he comes back to Jesus. He praises God who healed him, and he offers thanks. The health the Samaritan leper celebrates at Jesus' feet is a feeling of wholeness, a new experience. It is something no priest or physician could measure or prescribe. The Samaritan returns to Jesus, the source of his healing, to offer praise at the top of his lungs. His joy is abundant and his gratitude extravagant.

There is a story told by Patricia Houck Sprinkle that tells of a plain, old shoemaker's awl that is on prominent display in the French Academy of Science.

The story is that it was this awl that fell one day from the shoemaker's table and put out the eye of his nine-year-old son. Soon, the child became blind in both eyes and was forced to attend a school for the blind. At school, the child learned to read by handling large, carved, wooden blocks.

When the shoemaker's son grew up, he thought of a new way for the blind to read. It involved punching dots on paper, and so it was that Louis Braille, the shoemaker's son, devised this new method. And he did it by using the same awl that had blinded him all those years earlier creating a whole new reading system for the blind.

Each of us knows of some devastating experience that happened to us or to someone we love. Those dreadful occurrences that on a scale of 1-10 would be an 11. And we can ask, "Why did God allow this to happen?" or we can ask, "How will God use it?" or "How will God redeem it?"

A doctor who used to see a lot of depressed and unhappy patients used to treat them by asking that for six weeks they say "Thank you" for every good thing that happened to them and keep a journal of the experience. The rate of cure was remarkable.

This is not too surprising since the world seems to consist of two groups of people: those who are grateful and those who are not. Our Canadians celebrated Thanksgiving earlier this week. In both the U.S. and Canada Thanksgiving is largely ignored by retailers. In the U.S. Thanksgiving is that little holiday between Halloween and Christmas. Right after Halloween, the Christmas decorations come out. Thanksgiving just happens to fall in between. If you are a retailer, you want to downplay Thanksgiving. If you are thankful for what you have, you're not likely to be rushing out to buy much. And that is not good for the corporate world. (From an article by Rurel Ausley Jr., "Give thanks in all circumstances," Northwest Florida Daily News, November 6, 1999, C1.)

In scripture, God asks for a lot of praise and gratitude. God does this, not because God is like some dictator who needs our constant praise but because we need to tell God how wonderful

God is and God knows that. Good music, art, dance and drama are not poorer for our failure to recognize and appreciate them. But we are. So it is with God. We need a grateful spirit that recognizes and resonates to God's abundance. Healthy, modest and happy people do a lot of praising. C. S. Lewis observed, "Readers [praising] their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite games...praise of weather, wines, ... colleges, ... children, flowers, ... rare beetles, even ... politicians or scholars." Cranky, unhappy people don't praise much of anything. "Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible" he wrote. (C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958], 94).

Each and every day we are given the opportunity to witness and maybe even be part of some miracle. Do we see them and give God thanks for them? God is the source of our life, our health and our salvation and continues to reach out to us wherever we are and whatever we do.

Condoleeza Rice writes, "Although I never doubted the existence of God, I think like all people I've had some ups and downs in my faith. When I first moved to California in 1981 to join the faculty at Stanford, there were a lot of years when I was not attending church regularly. I was traveling a lot. I was a specialist in international politics, so I was always traveling abroad. I was always in another time zone. One Sunday I was in the Lucky's Supermarket not very far from my house — I will never forget — among the spices, and an African-American man walked up to me and said he was buying some things for his church picnic. And he said, "Do you play the piano by any chance?"

"I said, "Yes." They said they were looking for someone to play the piano at church. It was a little African-American church right in the center of Palo Alto. A Baptist church. So I started playing for that church. That got me regularly back into churchgoing. I don't play gospel very well — I play Brahms — and you know how black ministers will start a song and the musicians will pick it up? I had no idea what I was doing and so I called my mother, who had played for Baptist churches.

"Mother," I said, "they just start. How am I supposed to do this?" She said, "Honey, play in C and they'll come back to you." And that's true. If you play in C, people will come back. I tell that story because I thought to myself, "My goodness, God has a long reach." I mean, in the Lucky's Supermarket on a Sunday morning." (Condoleeza Rice, "Walking in faith," *Dateline: Heaven*, August 31, 2002, mail@datelineheaven.com.)

Each and every day we are given the opportunity to witness to the glory of God, and to rejoice, give thanks and sing. But we need to practice because we aren't very good at it yet.

Andrew Davidson tells of visiting Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the great doctor and missionary, at his jungle hospital. When he visited the doctor, Schweitzer was 85 yrs old and there was one event that happened that Davidson remembered vividly. While visiting, one day at noon the group was walking up a hill when suddenly Dr. Schweitzer left the group and strode across the slope of the hill to an African woman who was struggling with a huge armload of firewood. The group watched with both admiration and concern as the 85 year-old doctor took the entire load of wood and carried it up the hill for the woman. When he reached the top, one of the members of the group asked Dr. Schweitzer why he did things like that, implying it was dangerous for a man his age. Schweitzer simply replied, "No one should ever have to carry a burden like that alone."

That is the heart of Jesus, and the heart of the story of the healing of the lepers, and it is the true

heart of stewardship - a grateful response to the healings, forgiveness and new life that we find in Jesus Christ.

We live in a materialistic, individualistic, and wealthy society and forget the one to whom we owe all that we have - the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Those who do not need God cannot know God. Dependency and thanksgiving go hand in hand when we acknowledge with gratitude the gifts of our Creator.

Every Sunday we pray the *Sursum corda*, "Lift up your hearts...we lift them to the Lord." "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God... It is right to give him thanks and praise." And indeed it is right and good that we should praise our Maker and offer our gratitude with our hearts, our lives, and our very being.

If all prayers can be reduced to please and thank-you then we seem to do much better with the former than the latter. If you were to turn in the prayer book to the section of prayers on page 810 and following, you would find 26 pages of requests and 6 of thanksgiving; 72 prayers of petition and intercession and 11 of thanksgiving.

In contrast, Thomas Hoyt in a work on testimony writes there is one classic praise testimony, popular in the contemporary Black Church, which goes something like this: "Thank you, God, for waking me up this morning; for putting shoes on my feet, clothes on my back and food on my table. Thank you, God, for health and strength and the activities of my limbs. Thank you that I awoke this morning clothed in my right mind." (Thomas Hoyt Jr., "Testimony," *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 94.)

"Clothed in my right mind." If you've ever had someone you love with Alzheimer's you know what an incredible gift it is to be clothed in your right mind.

Let us pray.

O God, our life, our health and our salvation, look with mercy on your people. Stir up in us a saving faith, that believing we may be healed, and being healed, we may delight to give you thanks. Amen.

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