



Sunday October 9, 2022
Luke 17:11-19 (Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

“I’m grateful.” That was the standard response of a friend of mine each time I asked him the casual question, “How are you?”

His answer took me by surprise. And not just the first or second time, but almost every time for the first few years of our friendship. As time went on, it didn’t surprise me quite as much, however, I continued to be struck by the simplicity and power of his statement. Quite honestly, it wasn’t the answer I expected. I think most of us would agree that when we ask someone, “How are you?” what we usually expect to hear is, “fine” or “pretty good” or once and a while, “great.”

“I’m grateful.” My friend chose his faithful words with care. And when I finally asked him why he always responded this way, he said, “I do this because I want to make a point – that gratitude isn’t only a response when things are going good in our lives, but it’s a matter of the heart and it’s also an intentional choice we make.”

That’s certainly true of one leper in today’s Gospel reading. As Jesus enters a village ten lepers approach him with a plea for healing but also keep their distance. They’re weary and worn by the condition that separates them from life, and in desperation they cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

In response, Jesus instructs them to go and show themselves to the local priest, promising by implication that they will be made well. And, indeed, as they travel they are made well. Ten were healed. Ten, no doubt, were surprised by this discovery. Perhaps some of them were overjoyed, celebrated, and ran to tell their family and friends. And perhaps a few even took it for granted. We don’t really know for sure because we’re never told what the rest of them do.

What we do know is that one of them not only felt thankful but decided to voice those emotions and express his gratitude to Jesus and to God. Gratitude is a desirable response to the blessings of life, but it’s also a conscious choice to be aware of those blessings, to name them, and to express our gratitude in what we say and do.

In our Gospel story this morning all ten of the lepers had some level of faith because they all went on Jesus’ word and instruction. Jesus didn’t perform any physical act to bring about their healing, he simply told them to do the ritual rite of going to the priest for inspection so that they could be declared clean.

Being declared clean would allow them to reintegrate into their communities, restoring wholeness and belonging. It’s only along the way that they seem to undergo the transformation. The Samaritan sensed this, and perhaps the rest did too. But why was he the only one to turn around?



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It appears that this Samaritan man realized he just encountered the grace of God. When he realized he was well, he turned around and headed back to Jesus. He didn't follow Jesus' full instructions to go to the priest. Instead, he returned to the source of this profound goodness in his life – Jesus. And along the way, he was so thankful to be alive, he began praising God with a loud voice. Where once he had to announce his brokenness, now he was pronouncing his gratitude by glorifying God.

For this Samaritan man, the most important thing seemed to be thanking God for what God had done through Jesus. It was more important than checking off a ritual task – even if that ritual task allowed him to reintegrate with his community at least partially.

It was more important than returning to his community and showing off his freedom. First, he wanted to say thank you. First, he wanted to acknowledge his gratitude to the person who did it for him. First, he wanted to worship.

Perhaps, this is why Jesus asks what happened to the other nine. He's making a point about how these others decided on something else, some other step, as their first act once they were healed.

Have you ever thought of those “the first thing I'll do” scenarios? The first thing you'd do if you won the lottery? The first thing you'd do if you got the dream job? The first thing you'd do if you no longer had a chronic condition? The first thing you'd do if you could change that one thing about your life? It makes me wonder, where does gratitude for God's grace fit into your plan?

Recognizing and voicing our gratitude is a choice that comes with consequences, because when we express our gratitude, we have the power to positively affect others around us and in-turn, shape the reality in which we live.

Think about it. Gratitude isn't the only emotion we might choose to express in response to the events we encounter on any given day. There are certainly reasons for gratitude, just as there are also reasons for fear, anger, jealousy, frustration, grief, and regret.

Each of these colors our experiences, and perhaps each of them has an important role to play from time to time. But, we have the ability to choose how much time and attention we grant each of these emotions, and as we do, we also dictate how much power we give them over our lives.

And that's the key – we have a choice. We may feel a range of emotions to all kinds of situations, but we can choose how to respond. When we're confronted by someone who's angry, do we respond with anger as a form of self-protection or do we choose empathy, trying to understand the emotions of the other, and gratitude that the person was willing to be honest? When we encounter a setback in



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something at school or work, do we express frustration and give up, or a determination to keep at it and gratitude for what we've learned through this setback? How we respond is a choice.

An older friend of mine is living with a form of incurable brain cancer. After much treatment and prayer, it's gone into what's called "partial remission" – it's not growing, but it can't be removed. One day it will grow again and take his life. But not today. And he's not only grateful but also shares that gratitude. I suspect that he has moments where he feels bitter or resentful or fearful or any of the other range of emotions that would be completely understandable, but he chooses to live gratefully, seeing each day as another gift of God's grace and voicing his gratitude.

Maybe that seems like a tall order, something beyond the reach of most of us – available only to a few spiritual giants. Or maybe it's a response that, having been practiced over a lifetime, now comes easily to my friend and could come just as easily to each of us.

Because here's the thing: gratitude, like all of our options, becomes easier to choose as we practice it. Gratitude, like faith and hope and love and commitment, are not inherent traits that some have, and others don't, but rather gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time.

And as you practice giving thanks and more frequently share your gratitude, you not only grow in gratitude but become an example for others. But even more than that, you create an environment in which it's easier to be grateful and encourage those around you to see the blessings all around us.

Take a moment to scan the latest news headlines and you'll see how scarce and desperately needed more expressions of gratitude are. Accusations, excuses, anger – these seem to dominate our culture. We seem to live in the age of complaining, whether shared in person or increasingly across social media. In these situations, gratitude is a powerful response

Saying "I'm grateful" doesn't simply express our thanksgiving but what it does is offer a counter-cultural voice that has the power to reshape those around us, to push back against the tide of resentment and complaining that holds us back, and it makes room for a fresh appreciation of God's renewing and saving grace.

If you haven't read my October newsletter article yet – spoiler alert – it's all about gratitude. For the three months that Pastor Chris was gone on sabbatical, one of my daily spiritual practices was to give thanks to God for our thriving congregation and all the encouragement, help, and support countless people offered to help me be successful in leading. Gratitude is a choice.



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But I also want to recognize that this may be a very difficult ask for some. Some of you are so overwhelmed by grief or loss, betrayal, illness or some other reason that you may have difficulty offering your gratitude right now. And I want to reassure you that it's okay – it will come.

Gratitude isn't a command, it's an invitation – one God never gets tired of making. So, for now, if this seems beyond you, just know that God understands, and for the time being the rest of us will give thanks in your place.

So, let's take another look at our world. Is it filled with challenges? Yes. But it's also filled with an abundance of blessings. Families that care for each other, schools filled with teachers who care deeply about their students, relief agencies that tend to those who are suffering, medical personnel and first responders who work tirelessly to ensure our health and safety, service people who regularly put their lives on the line at home and around the world, neighbors who support one another, and a community of faith where welcome is extended, grace and love are preached, and lives of faith are nourished, and so much more.

This world is full of challenges and blessings. Which will we focus on?

My friends, the next time someone asks, "How are you?" I invite you to pause for a moment to ponder all the ways that God has been gracious to you and blessed you even in difficult and challenging circumstances. And when you've done that, would you consider your first response to turn to God with a thankful heart and say, "I'm grateful." And when you do, dear friends, even amid all the challenges of this life, then get up and go on your way, because your faith has made you well! Thanks be to God. Amen!