

October 9, 2016

Gratitude. Gratitude is one of the most powerful human emotions. We can be grateful to our parents for their love and sacrifice for us. Grateful to our spouse, if we have one, for being a person that loves and supports us in good times and bad. We can be grateful for children, if we have them, for the joy and sense of purpose they bring to our lives. And of course we can be grateful for grandchildren—if we have them, we know why.

Gratitude is also the most fundamental emotion many feel toward God—being grateful for life, for being alive, for the world we live in with all its wonder and beauty. In fact, the term for the main act of Christian worship, the Eucharist, can be literally translated into English as “The Great Thanksgiving.” So what we are doing right now is a liturgy of giving thanks.

In today’s Gospel, gratitude seems to be one of the main lessons for us. Jesus encounters a group of lepers, people with a horrible disease that were also socially ostracized based on the Law. In other words, people used Scripture to isolate people who needed compassion. But that’s a topic for a different sermon. The people in need apparently knew of Jesus’ reputation as a healer and they were pleading for his help. It is hard to imagine what their lives must have been like.

The actual healing process was strange—Jesus simply said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” That was the required step that someone suffering from leprosy needed to do if they had already been healed from the disease. The priests would confirm the healing and allow them back into community life. So Jesus’ words, “Go and show yourselves to the priests” implied healing was going to come—and it did! We are told all ten lepers were healed.

But the lesson for us is what happened after the healing. For whatever reason, though all were healed, only one came back and said, “Thank you” to Jesus. Perhaps the other nine were too excited to think straight and have good manners. I am willing to cut them a break, though Jesus seemed surprised and even annoyed. Regardless of what happened with the nine, the person that did come back serves as the example for us. He was grateful to God and to the person God used to change his life. And he said “Thank you” to both.

In our lives, we may not have had quite as dramatic of a life situation that demands thanks—or we might. The deeper point is whether we are aware of the grace that “always precedes and follows us” as the collect for today states. We are surrounded by waves of grace that can inspire us, guide us, provide for us, and protect us as we go through this life’s journey. It really is amazing!

So if that is true, what do we do? How do we develop gratitude as a life skill, a way of being, when we receive the graces of life? How can we be grateful as a way of life regardless of

difficult or even devastating circumstances? There are at least a few practices we can take up. I will offer some to you and I hope we will talk among ourselves about some other ideas.

When I was in the corporate world, I had a very fine boss who gave all of his managers a simple desk ornament that had a giant paper clip on it for holding messages or what not. On the base of it there was this phrase, “Have you thanked someone today?” Pretty simple, but powerful. In our job as managers, as leaders, under the pressure of a demanding corporation, it was very easy to be task and goal oriented. We would ask, “Did we make our numbers? Are we doing everything we have identified as important and that we have agreed to do? “

In the midst of those demands—those we receive and those we make—it is easy to forget to be grateful. We may focus on the one thing an employee forgot to do and take for granted the 99 things the employee did well, maybe even outstandingly. I have heard some managers say, “Well I don’t want that person to get a big head.” And I have heard some employees say, “You don’t need to thank me—it’s my job” or “I don’t want to be thanked—I am glad to do it.” And that’s all fine. But those responses leave out how gratitude lubricates our common life, acknowledging good work and facilitating learning and cooperation so we can all flourish.

So an important way of cultivating gratitude is to say “Thank you.” Seems obvious. But how often do we do it? Let’s try to make it a point this week to say thank you to at least one person every day. Maybe as simple as when someone holds the door for you. Maybe something bigger. And of course you can say “thank you” more than once a day, too!

Another key to gratitude is how we see our lives and the world around us. In popular jargon, we may ask, “Are we glass half empty or half full types of people?” But it is more than that. Do we feel *entitled* in life? Do we want our way, the way the way we want it? Because if we have that attitude, we tend to be critical, demanding, and hard to satisfy. If we are that way in how we see our lives and relate to others, then we are less likely to be grateful.

When people return from a mission trip like Honduras, you hear people talk about “First World” problems. Have you heard that phrase? Those are the things we in America and other rich areas of the world tend to complain about. Like, “It takes my computer a whole thirty seconds to download. It’s terrible!” Or “The cost of repairs for my BMW are awful.” Or “The steak at Stoney River was just not up to par; when you spend \$100 for a meal, it should be fabulous!” Those are examples of “First World” problems.

It’s not that they aren’t problems (well, at least some of them). It is just they are not up to the problems that people face in other parts of the world. Even beyond comparisons with other parts of the world, it reveals a sense of entitlement that is so ungrateful, so unappreciative of the graces that always “precede and follow us.” So to maximize our gratitude we need to change how we see the world.

For example, see things as if you are seeing them for the first time, and appreciate them—a tall, majestic oak tree... a clear, flowing, cold river... a happy baby... a faithful old dog (I mean a real dog, not your husband)... The list can go on and on. You see, we have a lot—**a lot**—to be grateful for in life. And even when life is hard, when there is devastation like that which comes from a hurricane or a dire diagnosis, there is still much for which to be grateful-- things and people that give us joy, that bring light even to the darkness of our lives.

So let us be grateful people, grateful followers of Jesus Christ. Let our gratitude be apparent to all. May our gratitude transform us into a gracious way of living. May we remember to express appreciation to others. May we give generously because we know that all that we have is a gift from God. May we try to express gratitude at least as much—okay, let's aim for **much** more—than how we express criticism and demands.

Because when we do that, life will change for us. We will see the world and other people-- and God-- differently. We will understand the core issue of the human enterprise—that it is not all about us and what we want. It is about God and the caring community God is calling us to be. And then we will be grateful. Amen.