

“The Church In Action: Living Out Gratitude”

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Luke 17:11-19

CHILDREN’S TIME

Many people like to write in diaries or journals. Some do it to keep track of what they do everyday. Some people take a journal with them when they travel and jot down where they went and what they saw. Other people write about their thoughts and feelings in a journal and the journal can start to feel like a friend.

Keeping a journal or a diary is a great way to express yourself and can help you become more creative as you get older – you might want to write stories and poems in your journal.

One great thing to do with a journal is to write down things or draw pictures of things for which you are thankful. We can be thankful for all of the things that God made, right? What are some of the things that God made?

Yes, everything. God created everything: the colorful sunsets, sunshine, raindrops, ladybugs, eagles, forests, mountains, friends, peaches, apples, pumpkins, flowers – everything.

One way to honor God is to thank God for what God has given us. We can do that in prayer, and we can do it by drawing or coloring a picture of things for which we are thankful. Maybe every day we can draw a couple of things.

What are a couple of things you are thankful for that you could draw a picture of today?

Everyday you will find there are lots of things for which to give thanks. As you give thanks, don’t be surprised if you feel more happy and blessed.

SERMON

Phyllis and I hosted our family this year for Thanksgiving at Thelma Black’s house, which is now our new house in Farmington Hills. During the day, my brother, who is part of an orthodox Christian Church, was reflecting on Thanksgiving and shared something that a priest told him that struck me.

The priest told him that it is impossible to sin when your heart is full of gratitude — that sin and gratitude cannot occupy the same space. We cannot be self-centered when we are full of gratitude.

Think about that. Gratitude has the power to keep us from wandering off, but also have us in full view of God's grace and love. Gratitude has the power to keep us aligned with the Holy Spirit. Gratitude has the power to keep us focused on God's work and building God's Church!

Gratitude is a powerful thing. Today we have a story of someone who was full of gratitude.

READ LUKE 17:11-19

The lepers in the story had been wounded not only by the physical ailment of leprosy, but they had been ostracized by the community. Lepers were secluded. The families and communities that had once supported them and provided for them physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially are the ones who sent them to live somewhere else — in a remote place, outside the city so that they would not come too close to anyone who was healthy and thereby contaminate them.

In Leviticus 13 and 14, there were laws regarding those who had leprosy. After they were evaluated by a priest and determined to have leprosy (which was a range of skin diseases), they needed to live separate from the community, dress in rags, cover their mouth, and if ever they were traveling anywhere near others who did not have leprosy, they needed to call out "Unclean! Unclean!"

Can you imagine that day when a beloved family member needed to be removed and sent away? The family and community knew that they may never see their loved one again, because in certain cases leprosy was fatal. It must have been like a funeral with lots of weeping and sadness. After they left, grief and mourning would come.

Can you imagine what it might have been like for that person with leprosy — how living in that kind of environment must have felt?

So these ten people with leprosy call to Jesus from a distance along the road and Jesus "heals" them all, sending them to the priest, as Leviticus required, before they could return to their families and community.

The word for heal here also means “save.” This is Jesus acting to save the lost.

The nine ex-lepers are shown up by the one, who is also an outsider, a Samaritan, who returns to thank Jesus for what he received.

But it was not only the nine who were shown up, we also are shown up, all of us who do not praise God always and for everything.

It was the Apostle Paul who wrote to the Ephesian church telling them to give thanks to God “at all times and for everything.”

Jesus, and Paul, understood that the most helpful way to live life was in gratitude.

Truly, everything that we have, all of our physical possessions, the food we eat, the air we breathe, the relationships we have — all things are gifts to us from God for which the best response is to hold gratitude in our hearts. All things are from God, for God, and to God.

The best and most helpful response to life is gratitude for all things.

In my Thanksgiving email to the congregation, I mentioned the Inter-

Faith Thanksgiving service at First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham last Sunday. During that service, Father David Buersmeyer, from St. Regis Catholic Church, shared one of the gratitude practices of Father Solanus Casey.

Casey, who died 60 years ago, was the Roman Catholic priest who was assigned to St. Bonaventure Monastery, with the Capuchins, in Detroit. He is currently going through the process of sainthood in the Catholic Church.

Father Solanus was director of altar services, keeping track of the communion elements. He was also assigned to be doorkeeper of the monastery. Both of these were considered minor tasks for rookie friars, however Father Solanus took great care and pride in his work.

It was as doorkeeper that Father Solanus became very well known. People began coming to the monastery from all over, asking for Father Solanus and his wise counsel. Sick and troubled people would come seeking his blessing, and within his counsel many found healing.

Father Solanus had a practice of thanking God ahead of time. This meant that in his daily routines, he

would thank God before things happened. He would thank God before a meal. He would thank God before meeting with a fellow friar, before taking a trip, before going to bed and just as he awoke.

When someone knocked on the monastery door, before he knew who it was, he would give thanks for them and whatever situation they might bring.

I am sure that people knocked on the door with dire situations, perhaps with terminal diagnosis, or family conflict, the desperate or lonely, those who had lost loved ones. There might have even been those knocking who were trying to swindle something from the monastery.

As he opened the door each time, Father Solanus was thankful for the opportunity to be available and was able to find gratitude in his heart to share with people in their place of need.

He found that keeping this practice of being thankful for everything and in all situations set the tone for his orientation to every dimension of life.

What would your family be like if you thanked God before things happened?

You know those tough points, tender points in your family, those challenges, those times when you are simply at your wits end. How would beginning with gratitude alter your experience of being in your family? How might you feel or act differently if you began each encounter with gratitude?

Take a few moments to consider that.

Now imagine, what would a large business in the city look like if half or even 10% of people began each thing they did with thankfulness? — before each business meeting, before answering the ringing phone, before sitting down to discuss a contract, before asking for the late report, before making a phone call to confront an employee about a pattern of tardiness?

What kind of business might that be?

We create a certain kind of world by the words we choose and the actions we take — and our actions and words are shaped by our attitude. What if gratitude were to shape our words and actions?

What kind of world might we be creating?

Of course this is not a simple or easy thing, because there are so many things that knock us out of the space of gratitude.

What are some of the things that knock us out?

Jesus' words to the grateful leper take us another step deeper into the meaning of this story. At the end, Jesus told him to "get up" and be on his way. The Greek word for "get up" was a word associated with resurrection for the early Church.

Literally, this Samaritan man, who had been removed from the community and his family, had been healed, saved, resurrected. He was brought back to life! He was about to be restored to those who loved him, who had considered him dead. There was about to be much rejoicing in Samaria.

The new life that Israel had longed for as part of a new world and new society had come to this man's family and community.

From that day forward, nothing will compare to this reality. After this,

life only made sense when lived with gratitude.

We also have been given new life like the leper. We have been saved, healed and restored, but sometimes we forget.

Today, may we remember — get in touch with our own salvation story. We each have one. Some of you here have a dramatic conversion story where you were truly on a destructive path and God got a hold of you and turned you around.

Some of you here grew up in the church and never really knew a time living outside the arms of grace. However, you have experienced times when you were supported by the church at a low point in life. Perhaps you have had those experiences when you were praying and reading scripture and God's Spirit moved you and provided an insight that set you on a different course.

Some of you can look back over life journey and notice God slowly and gradually lead you through life, maturing you in your faith through all of the so called "set backs." This has been your path into a new life.

We each have the story of our journey and how God has been at

work in our lives, giving us the gift of new life. May we look and notice God's grace and love in such a way that our only response is with an overflowing gratitude that shapes our lives and the world around us.