

“Pictures Of Thankfulness”

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Luke 17:11-19

In 2008, Hailey Bartholomew said that she discovered the secret to happiness. Prior to that she had who she described as a lovely husband and a couple of great kids.

From the outside, it looked like her life was great. But on the inside she was depressed, struggling to enjoy her life. She felt as though she was on the great treadmill of life where she would get married have a couple of kids and then die. What was the point?

But she also wanted to be a better mother, a better husband, and to enjoy life, so she sought out this nun that she had heard about who was offering life coaching and spiritual direction to people.

This woman became a mentor and life guide for Hailey, giving her a whole new perspective through some simple questions and suggestions.

This wise nun never had children or a husband but was full of life wisdom. She helped Hailey to

open her mind suggesting that perhaps happiness was found inside of reflection on gratitude in her life.

This initially seemed quite underwhelming to her.

You see, Hailey had a knowing in her head that she was thankful for her kids and her life, but this thankfulness didn't reside in her heart. She had no feeling associated with the things for which she was thankful.

The nun's simple recommendation was to take a few minutes each day for ten days to reflect on what touched her in the feeling center of her heart for which she could be thankful.

She took on this exercise and found those ten days were amazing, and she wanted more.

So, inspired by this wise nun, Hailey began what became the “365 Grateful Project.”

Hailey was into photography, so she challenged herself to take a whole calendar year (365 days) and find something every day for which she was grateful and take a picture of it.

She found simple, little moments throughout the day that had her

delight in that moment, cultivating the space of gratitude in her life.

The picture on the cover of the program today was a picture Hailey took on June 23, 2008 of her daughter playing with a pecan shell. That had her smile.

Another picture was of many green things in nature. One was the hand of her 3-year-old daughter helping her down the steps. Another was a parking meter with money on it when she had no money in her pocket. Small yet touching moments.

A big revelation for Hailey through this project was realizing that the expectations she had for other people prevented her from appreciating who they actually were. This realization led her to notice things she never noticed before.

For example, she talks about how one night her “non-romantic” husband served dinner and put the biggest piece of pie on her plate. She realized that he had been serving her first and giving her the best for a long time, but she never noticed. Now she was noticing and it touched her deeply. She saw it as one more way that her husband showed her that he loved her, something she had been taking for granted.

After this year-long project, Hailey’s husband was asked what he noticed was different in his relationship with her since she started this project. He said that for the first time in eight years of marriage he felt like he was enough for her.

Hailey’s life was opening up in new and unexpected ways. Looking back she noticed that her day-to-day parenting responsibilities had become drudgery. But now she was able to take notice of the little things that brought her distinct joy — like singing loudly in the car, pretending to be candy canes, losing two front teeth, and so many other simple moments. These reminded her of the wonderful gift it was to be a mother.

She started 365grateful.com to foster gratitude in the world. She said that she wants to help people to “find the gold in the mud.” What a gift!

I have another story for you, this one from the Bible.

I want to give you a bit of background to help paint the picture of this story for you. This is from the first century in the Middle East. It refers to the cities of Samaria and Galilee. Galilee was where Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple were located and therefore

it the home turf for the Jews and also the central for Jesus' ministry.

Samaria was a city north of Galilee. It was known by the Jews as a place of half-breed people who were unclean, undeserving, and needed to be avoided. Religious leaders who were thought of as the most holy people would be expected to walk the long way around Samaria to avoid coming in contact with the people there.

This story also refers to lepers. Leprosy was a broad term to describe a number of skin disorders or diseases. Many of these conditions were contagious, so lepers were excluded from the community including all religious practices.

People with leprosy were directed to live in a community of people out beyond the town limits where those with leprosy and other sicknesses were sent to live. This was to protect against spreading the diseases, but also as a religious mandate to help others remain pure.

Any Jew who came into contact with someone who had leprosy had to separate themselves, and perform numerous religious cleansing rituals and jump through certain hoops in order to be restored back into the community.

One of these rituals was to cleanse through bathing in a particular way and then to present themselves to a priest, who would inspect them physically and consider the rituals they performed before restoring them to community life.

If someone who had leprosy and lived in a colony outside of town got better, they would have similar hoops to jump through before being considered physically well and also ceremonially clean, two different things. After being inspected by a priest, they could be restored back to the community.

As I read the story, I invite you to see a picture in your mind of the characters and the scene. Think of what expression might be on the faces of the people, and how they might be moving. Consider the emotions they express and how Jesus interacts with them. Imagine this story put to video, maybe as a short movie.

READ LUKE 17:11-19

For the one who expressed his gratitude before people and before God, Jesus, as priest, declared the man both physically healed and made ceremonially clean.

First of all, this is extraordinary on its face, but add to this the fact that the man is a Samaritan, an

outsider from inherently impure blood. That makes this act of restorative healing and the declaration of purity even more striking. And be certain that it was a whole lot more alarming for the first readers of this story than it is for us today.

After this grateful Samaritan falls at Jesus' feet, Jesus tells him to get up. This sounds straight forward and simple, however to the first century Christian the language was a clear reference to Jesus rising up in resurrection from the dead.

This man, because he had leprosy, had been dead to his family, to his community, and most likely to himself as well. Now, because of his encounter with Jesus, he is alive!

This man knows that what lays in front of him is a brand new life. He is filled with joy because he literally has been raised from the dead! What thankfulness must fill his heart to the point of overflowing!

This story also seems to imply that it is a rare occasion that people actually share gratitude as an expression of their faith.

After all, ten people were fully healed, but only one came back to acknowledge with deep gratitude how God had given him new life.

Perhaps God has also offered us an abundance of goodness, grace, healing, and restoration — indeed new life — but how often do we express our faith with a deep gratitude like this man did with humility and distinct joy.

He understood what Paul wrote in Ephesians about giving thanks to God for all things. He wrote,

...be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:19-20)

I have a way for you all to practice expressing your faith through gratitude this week during the Thanksgiving holiday with an activity you can take to any family or community get together you attend. It is on the goldenrod sheet included in your program this morning. (The following two pages if you're reading this.)

It is simple. The first side includes the instructions and the second includes a bunch of questions. Cut out those questions and put them in an empty gravy boat or some other container and pass it around the table. Each person pulls out a question and answers it.

the
THANKSGIVING
PROJECT

-MISSION-

Create connection by the simple act of answering a question.

Thanksgiving is a day of gratitude. A day to be together and reconnect with what matters most. The Thanksgiving Project is simple. Take your time, take your turn, and answer a question.

Serving suggestions

1. Find a jar, a mug, or gravy boat.
2. Cut the questions on the back onto slips of paper. Add your own questions as you wish.
3. Fill the jar.
4. Invite the youngest person to go first.
5. Choose a question and answer it.
6. Pass the jar.
7. Give thanks.

This activity was created by Sugar Paper with Casper ter Kuile at Harvard Divinity School.

For what are you grateful?

What is the best advice you've been given this year?

What risk did you take this year?

What do you want to learn this coming year?

What are you proud to have let go of this year?

What have you been surprised by this year?

Who is someone you're proud of and why?

What moment of kindness do you remember from this year?

How do you remind yourself what matters most?

Where do you find courage?

Who inspires you?

Which memory do you wish you could relive from this year?

What is your favorite lesson you learned this year?

What's one thing that makes you happy to be alive?

What is your favorite way to give to others?

What are you proud to have accomplished this year?

What are three things that make you smile?

What is your favorite family tradition?