

“Grateful”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 17: 11-19

What are you grateful for? How do you express gratitude to others? How is your life lived in gratitude?

Over the last few weeks, I’ve had opportunities to ask those questions to some of you in the church, either in governing board meetings, church school classes, or individual conversations. The responses I’ve heard reflect appreciation and thankfulness for many different realities in life. I’ve heard gratitude for family and friends who are loving and nurturing to us, always present when we are most in need. I’ve heard gratefulness for living in a country that affords the freedoms and liberties which are not a given elsewhere in the world. I’ve heard thankfulness for good health, for a job that provides for our family, and for opportunities for growth and recreation. A lot of times, it can be fairly easy to look at our lives and consider what we are grateful for.

On Thursday of this past week, I experienced gratefulness in two distinct ways. First, our family has banked with Chase Bank since we moved to Indianapolis in 2003. But back in the summer, we opened a new checking account at Fifth Third Bank. The reason we did this was because where Erin goes to college in North Carolina, they don’t have Chase banks, but they do have Fifth Third Banks. So, over the last few months, we’ve been using our old bank account until we were out of checks for that account, which happened last week. On Wednesday, I deposited by paycheck from the church for the first time at a Fifth Third ATM machine.

When I looked at my online balance on Thursday, I saw that the check had been deposited, but then it had immediately been cancelled. I was perplexed and upset, but very quickly realized the mistake I had made. When I deposited the check, I wrote our Chase checking account number on the back under my signature, instead of the Fifth Third account. I did it without even thinking about it. I went to the bank, groveling and apologetic, and they indicated that it would be seven to ten days before the check was returned to me, or I could have a new check written by my employer. I AM GRATEFUL that our treasurer, Troy Judy, was willing to come in Thursday after work and write another paycheck to me to make up for my mistake! And I promise I will now remember my new account number from here on out!

The second reason I was grateful on Thursday was related to my car. Over the last few weeks, I’ve noticed that the van has not been running smoothly, and on Tuesday, it was especially bad. Debbie and Heather went to Chicago on Tuesday to make a college visit and to see good friends of ours. That meant I had the benefit of having another car I could drive. When I called the dealer on Wednesday, they made it clear they had no appointments available, but if I could get it up to them and leave it, they could work it in.

I could get the van up there, but I needed a way back home to the car that was running! And my family was out of town. I had already planned to get together for lunch with Tom Markey on Thursday after an appointment I had at Second Presbyterian Church that morning. I wrote Tom an email explaining things, and asked reluctantly if he could maybe swing up to Honda of Fishers to pick me up. I AM GRATEFUL that Tom was able and flexible with his schedule to do just that, and needless to say, I made sure he got whatever he wanted for lunch as my way of saying, "Thank you."

I, like many of you, tend to be pretty self-sufficient and independent, and feel like asking for help can be a burden I place on others. But in both of these situations, I realized that I could not rectify the situation I was in on my own. Either because of my own mistake, or because of circumstances beyond my control, I had to rely on others and ask for help. And in both cases, others were willing to give of their time and energy to help me. My gratitude emanated from an acknowledgement of my interdependence on others, so that I could accomplish the pressing tasks before me. I was grateful, I am grateful, and I will continue to be grateful.

When we live in a spirit of gratefulness, we view the world through a different set of lenses. We see more of the positives and blessings in our lives, rather than focusing solely on what is wrong or missing in our lives. In gratefulness, we realize that we are not the source of all that we have, but instead we are blessed by our Creator with all that we are grateful for. As Christians and as a community of believers, we are called to gratitude, and in doing so, our lives are enriched and deepened in the knowledge and love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In this story from the Gospel of Luke, we have an encounter with gratefulness and Jesus. But it's got a lot of layers to it, layers which reveal a great deal about our humanity, our sense of gratitude, and how God can break through so many human barriers to illicit praise and thanksgiving from those we least expect.

To begin, we have another occasion to welcome a Samaritan into the gospel story. Brian Stoffregen explains that the Samaritans were actually Jews, but not considered "real Jews" by the majority of people. By Jesus' time, Samaritans were considered half-breeds by the "true" Jews, so they were considered to have perverted the race. They were also considered to have perverted the religion. They did not look to Jerusalem as the place to worship God, instead centering their worship at Mt. Gerizim. They interpreted the Torah differently than the southern Jews. The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans was so great that some Jews would go miles out of their way to avoid walking on Samaritan territory (www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke17x11).

When this dynamic is considered in light of our story today, it is all the more remarkable that a Samaritan is depicted as the one who returns. This Samaritan was not only impure in the eyes of Jews because of his being Samaritan, but he was also a leper. A leper was someone who suffered greatly the indignities of life in biblical times, and was not only a social cast away, but religiously was considered a strange act of God which no one quite understood.

In this story, 10 lepers approach Jesus, but do so while keeping their distance. When they call out to Jesus, he tells them to go show themselves to the priests, which was the common practice according to Jewish law. The difference this time is that as they were going to the temple, they are cured of their leprosy. Obviously, they were thrilled and excited, and nine of them continued on their way to show the priests.

But then there is the one who breaks the rules, who is overcome by emotion and goes back to say, "Thank you." Didn't Jesus tell him to go to the priests? Didn't Jesus instruct him to present himself at the temple, as the other nine did? It seems like this Samaritan is being a rebel once again in the face of God's healing touch.

Jesus says, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Where is God, in the temple or at the feet of Jesus? Where is mercy, where we are used to looking or in new, unexpected places? Where is one's faith, in a place seeking more for ourselves, or in a place giving thanks for all we have been given?

One thing I have always wondered about from this story, which is not described in the text, is how did this change the Samaritan's life? I imagine that he likely thought of his life as before being healed and after being healed – sort of the way we think of our lives before and after we're married, or before and after we have kids, or before and after we experience a major event in life. The way things used to be are no more; now, life has changed and is different.

For this man, that moment in life was an encounter with Jesus. Something spurred him to stop, turn around, and return to the source of his healing to give thanks and praise. Consider how much his life must have been filled with gratitude after that moment. Instead of being excluded due to his disease and ethnicity, he was welcomed and embraced, now being included after he had been healed from this awful disease. Jesus was the source of his new life. God was the center of his gratefulness. I imagine the rest of his life was one full of thankfulness and gratitude.

Four weeks ago, I attended the Stewardship Kaleidoscope Conference in St. Louis, co-sponsored by the Presbyterian Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. At that conference, Diana Butler Bass was one of the keynote speakers, and she spoke on her recently-published book, "Grateful." It is an excellent book that delves into how the American church and society looks at gratitude, and how we might reframe our outlook on life through the lens of gratefulness. In fact, I hope we might consider using this as a book study in the coming months here at John Knox.

Bass quotes the Catholic writer Henri Nouwen in her book, and his words echo her premise that gratitude is not just being thankful for what is good in life, but being thankful for life itself. Nouwen writes: *To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives – the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections – that requires hard spiritual work. Still, we are only truly grateful people when we can say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather*

forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for
(*The Spiritual Work of Gratitude*, January 12, 2017, www.henrinouwen.org/meditation/the-spiritual-work-of-gratitude/).

I now carry two things in my pockets which help me remember being grateful. One is the rock with the word “grateful” on it, which I shared with the children about earlier. Diana Butler Bass does this as a practice of gratitude, and it was such a great idea, I am totally stealing it today!

The other is this pocket prayer shawl which Margaret Von Hoven made. Many of you have these yourself, and Margaret has made so many that hundreds and hundreds of people now have them. Whenever I put my hand in my pocket and feel that soft yarn, I am reminded of God’s abiding presence no matter what is happening in my life.

Amid the stresses of getting cars fixed or paying for college tuition or managing a busy work and family calendar, I touch this and I am grateful for the gift of life God has given to me. Amid the burdens so many are carrying around me – burdens of illness, grief, emotional distress, and anxiety – I am grateful for the gift of being present and connected to them – a gift that God has given to me. Amid the joys of children’s accomplishments, the sadness of being far apart in distance from family, the pain of witnessing friends making unhealthy choices, the anguish of a world so divided in speech and deed – I am grateful for the gift of life God has given to me. And amid the grief I continue to hold and live through, knowing that my own father held one of these prayer blankets near the end of his life, I am grateful for the gift of life God has given to me.

And it is out of that gratefulness that I am compelled to give freely back to God. I pray that you will feel a similar motivation – not to give and make your pledge for next year out of guilt or duty or indebtedness, but out of deep gratitude for the gift of life God has given to you. Perhaps, when our giving emanates from a grateful heart, we truly draw closest to the enthusiasm and faith of the healed Samaritan, who had to come back, breaking the rules, giving praise and thanksgiving to the source of his new life.

“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him” (17:15-16).

May we be led to do the same – today, tomorrow, and all the days of our lives.
Thanks be to God. Amen.