

THANKSGIVING
Tuesday, November 22, 2011
Luke 17:11-19
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Life without gratitude is life that falls short of the abundant life that Jesus came to offer.

I was at the YMCA late yesterday afternoon. It was later than I had hoped, much later. It seemed everything on my agenda earlier in the day took longer than I expected, much longer. And then there were the usual unexpected interruptions. Now I have grown accustomed to interruptions—they go with the territory of being a pastor. And I have also found that it is in the interruptions where the deepest and most meaningful interactions take place. It is in the interruptions where I most often and most profoundly experience Christ in my midst. As a result, my attempts to keep a handle on my schedule were, once again, doomed. So I was late. And by being so late, I had to choose between my workout (and I had missed the weekend) and another opportunity that I had hoped to do. So I was frustrated, and when I'm frustrated, I get annoyed, mostly with myself, and when I am annoyed, I'm cranky.

This is the state I was in yesterday at the Y when a friend came to me in the fitness center, where I was struggling with some weights that seemed to me heavier than they were last Friday, much heavier. I've know this friend since coming to Duluth 18½ years ago. I've seen him go through the heartache of divorce and then the joy of marriage. I've baptized several of his grandchildren in Lake Superior. I've seen him go through a horrendous car accident. I've visited him in the hospital. I know that he's in recovery, a life-long struggle. My friend came up to me with his usual bright smile, and he put his hand on my shoulder (my hands were occupied struggling with weights that seemed far too heavy), he looked me in the eye, and he said, "I came to tell you how grateful I am to count you as one of my friends. I came to tell you how much our friendship means to me. I'm making a point this Thanksgiving to express my gratitude to everyone who has been important in my life. And you are one of those people."

I was taken aback and I stopped pumping my weights and I looked at him. My friend managed to break through my edgy, even hostile exterior (remember, I was frustrated and annoyed), and as he stood there just looking at me, my eyes filled with tears. I said something like, "I feel the same way about you." Then he walked away.

I have been thinking about that encounter almost constantly since then. I know my friend to be in recovery, and I wonder if expressing gratitude is a necessary ingredient in the program. Whether or not that is the case, he was sincere in what he said. And then I began to wonder if one has to be in recovery mode in order to realize and come to embrace one's connectedness and interdependence with those around us. Then I began to wonder if maybe people in recovery have an *advantage* over those of us who are not,

because they know their connectedness and interdependence, and maybe those not in recovery are still holding onto the myth of independence and self-reliance.

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Our parable from the gospel of Luke has to do with gratitude. All ten lepers are “made clean” and told to show themselves to the priests. Leprosy was a dreaded condition, and the word covered a variety of conditions of the skin. Because the causes of the conditions were unknown, people feared contagion and contamination. People with leprosy were quarantined, living in colonies with one another. People with leprosy were not allowed contact with “healthy” people. And they had to announce their approach, so as to warn the unaware. They would cry out, “Unclean, unclean!” Because of social and religious rules and mores, their skin condition rendered them unclean, defiled, contaminated, a contagion. It is for this reason that Jesus commanded the ten lepers who had been made clean to show themselves to the priests, not to the physicians. It was the priests who had the authority to pronounce them ritually clean, so that they might once again rejoin society and to participate in religious life, attendance in the synagogue and even the Temple in Jerusalem.

Our parable has to do with gratitude or the lack of it. Ten lepers were made clean. Ten lepers were healed (these two English words are used, while the two are related in the Greek). One of them, “when he saw that he was healed,” turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and fell down before Jesus. We find out that he was a hated Samaritan, while the other nine are presumably Jews. Jesus wonders how it is that only one of the ten returned to offer thanks and praise. It is what Jesus says next that I want to lift up as particularly significant. Jesus says, “Get up and go your way . . .” “Rise up.” “Be resurrected!” It’s the same verb used for Jesus’ resurrection from the grave to newness of life. Jesus is telling the man to live in resurrection life. Then Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.” Literally: “Your faith has *saved* you.”

Here is the significance for me in this parable: All ten are made clean. All ten are healed. All ten are cured. But only one walks in *resurrection life*. Only one is *saved*. And what distinguishes the one from the other nine? *Gratitude*.

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It is possible for people to be perfectly healthy—to be made clean, to be healed, to be cured—but not to enjoy abundant life. And that abundant life has nothing to do with material possessions. It has to do with gratitude.

My friend who came to me yesterday at the YMCA walks in resurrection life. And he knows it. He has been at the edge of the abyss and stared down into its enveloping and all-consuming darkness more than once, and he has come to know his utter helplessness. He knows his need of resurrection. He knows his need of being saved. And he knows this on a daily basis, and he knows he will never outgrow or move beyond this need. And he is grateful. His days are lived in gratitude.

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I stopped at Mount Royal grocery store on my way to church tonight to buy some bread for our soup supper that Kristin had prepared for the choir. As I approached the entrance, I could see that the red Salvation Army bucket for donations was unattended—no one was there to ring the bell. I thought to myself, I should donate anyway, as I never walk past a bellringer without making a donation, but then I remembered that I had already given at least four times, and that I will no doubt contribute many more times. I could give more the next time, perhaps. So I walked on by. As I came out of the store with my bread, I saw a family of four standing at the still-unattended red bucket. The father was giving money to his small children, around the ages of seven and five, and they were gleefully putting their money into the bucket. Generosity and gratitude were being modeled and taught to those children by their parents.

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Thanks be to our Lord Jesus who brings us life, abundant life, a life lived in gratitude.

Amen.