

Sermon, 10/13/19, Luke 17:11-19

The great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, is known for saying that the basic human response to God is gratitude. It isn't fear or dread or guilt, but thanks.

Barth continues, "What else can we say to what God gives us but stammer praise?" (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, p.165)

The central part of our communion liturgy is the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give our thanks and praise. It is truly right and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise." At the very heart of our faith is to offer God our thanks and gratitude, not just on Sunday mornings, not just during communion, but every day, in all occasions. We pray that it is truly right and our greatest joy to give thanks and praise to God.

Contained within our denomination's Book of Confessions is the Heidelberg Catechism, a series of questions and answers on our reformed faith. Through the generations, some churches have even required confirmation classes to memorize this catechism. Question 86 asks: **Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why then should we do good works?** In part our answer is "so that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God, so that God may be praised through us." Our Christian duty is to be grateful to God, but who among us would also consider being grateful to God our greatest joy?

Today's Gospel reading from Luke is about 10 people with leprosy who cry out to Jesus to be healed. Communities in biblical times lived in dread of leprosy, fearful of the contagion. They would be suspicious of any skin blemish or rash. This led to social alienation, isolation and banishment from family, friends and faith community. I can't imagine a more miserable existence. When they approached Jesus they kept their distance. Jesus tells them to go to the priests. It's the priests, not a physician, that pronounces them clean, which was necessary for their own social reintegration into the community. One of the healed turned around to offer his thanks to Jesus. The question is, "Why did only one of them turn around with their thanks? We're quick to judge the other nine as ungrateful (me too, by the way), but I'm not sure we should judge them so quickly. Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priests. They were being obedient and did what Jesus told them to do. It reminds me of the Old Testament story of Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Naomi told them both to return to their homes. Orpah simply did what Naomi told her to do. Ruth, who didn't obey Naomi but instead stayed with her, is the one who we consider to be the faithful one, but Orpah was just as faithful. Similarly, in today's story, it's the

one who interrupts his obedience that gives thanks to Jesus, who, indeed, found the better way.

As he was still new to his faith, writer C.S. Lewis noted that the Bible, especially the Psalms, insists that we offer God our thanks and praise. He also observed a connection between gratitude and one's personal well-being. He wrote, "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balance minds praised most; while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least." He concludes, "Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible." (Ibid.) I don't know about the cranks, misfits, and malcontents (no judgment here), but Jesus seems to make it clear that living a life of praise and thanksgiving leads to a deeper health or wellness, perhaps a more satisfying spiritual wholeness. I ran across a medical study entitled, "Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude." The summary cited new evidence that gratitude, all by itself, is a stress reliever, grateful people are more hopeful, and there are links between gratitude and the immune system. I don't have quantifying evidence from this study, nor do I know how this works, but it seems to support Jesus' message to us. (Ibid, p 169).

Saying "Thank you" was not a prerequisite for Jesus to heal them. All ten with leprosy were physically healed equally. They were all made clean. On their way to visit the priest, only one "turned around" to express his thanks to Jesus. (Ibid, p. 166). In Luke, and throughout the New Testament actually, to turn around has a deeper theological meaning. It describes a movement of the whole person - a response to God's initiating gift of grace. The grateful man in this story does a 180 in his life, turning away from that which has been harmful to him, and turning toward living a grateful life in the presence of God. Jesus says to him, "Your faith has made you well," not just a medical healing, but a deeper holistic healing. The Greek word for "well" here is more than just the absence of illness; it's a wellness of the soul, a saving rescue, even. It was not only a restoration of health and social status, but also a redirection, a new direction of life, of faith, of meaning. I must say that this pronouncement Jesus makes, "Your faith has made you well," has done as much harm as good. It may seem to some that, if only I had had more faith, God would have healed me or my loved one. If only I had prayed harder, God would have healed me or my loved one. – as if we need to do something before receiving God's grace, when in fact, God's grace always comes first. Anything, including faith and gratitude, comes in response to that gift of grace.

Jesus said, "your faith has made you well." Faith in this context is more profound. Faith isn't something one quantifies. Instead Jesus is teaching us about the

nature of faith. Living a life of faith is living a life of gratitude. Living a life of gratitude leads to a healing deeper than the presenting illness. Jesus could have said, “your gratitude has made you well.” It is the thanking that heals the grateful leper. Did you notice that the act of healing in this passage is more like an aside. The act of thanksgiving is the point of the passage.

The basic Christian response to God is gratitude/praise/thanksgiving. Luke, in particular, reminds his readers of this, from the shepherds watching over their sheep by night, to witnesses of Jesus’ miracles, to the centurion at the foot of the cross, to the Jews and Gentiles who witness the growth of the early church in Acts. It is truly our right and our greatest joy to give God thanks and praise. And it is our greatest joy to give God our thanks and praise on this baptismal day for Thomas David. Baptism is a sign of God’s covenant with us, a sign of God’s desire to be in relationship with us. It is our bond of unity with Jesus Christ; it marks the beginning of new life with Christ, our turning around to follow Jesus. As with Holy Communion, in baptism we remember to give God our thanks and praise. “We thank you, O God, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. From it we are raised to share in his resurrection, through it we are reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit.” The promises we make at baptism include “turning away from sin, and turning to Jesus Christ.” And so we will do today with Thomas David and his parents, trusting in the gracious love and mercy of God.

Contemporary writer, Ann Lamott, often says she has two favorite prayers. In the morning she prays: “Help me, help me, help me,” and at bedtime she prays: “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” (Ibid, p. 169). Of course, she does. So, did the man who got healed, and so do we, because it’s our greatest joy. Amen.