

Sunday, October 13, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

**SERMON**

**Great Fullness**

Luke 17:11-19

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Today's reading is from the Gospel of Luke. It appears that the overarching intent for Luke in writing his Gospel and the Book of Acts, was to help the early Christian community to understand what God had revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke would certainly have made Oprah's Book Club List because he crafts the stories that he had researched to specifically make them relevant to the real-world of his readers. He wants us to know that this is very good news and directly significant and applicable to our life.

Today's story is a good example. In this short scene, Luke adds to a certain recurring pattern of behavior we find in his Gospel. The pattern of "returning and praising God." "Return and praise God" appears to be an archetypal characteristic for many of the people who connect with Jesus. For instance, do you remember the shepherds in the Christmas story? After encountering the baby Jesus they "returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen". And then again at the end of Luke's Gospel, after the disciples witnessed Jesus' ascension, we read that they "worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the Temple blessing God". Returning and praising God seems to be a distinct and repeated response for those who encounter Christ. As you listen to this week's story, keep those two verbs in mind: return and praise God.



## **SCRIPTURE**

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 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. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "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?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."



The word of God leading us to be a people of God...

## SERMON

Did you hear it? "Then, one of them...turned back, praising God with a loud voice...and thanked him." If I was there that day with Jesus, I think I might have been pretty uncomfortable with all this. For one thing the Jews and Samaritans were notorious enemies. Samaritans were considered by the Jews as a crude and religiously polluted people. And now, here comes one of them running toward Jesus like he's on fire. I'm on high alert. This looks dangerous and oh, now I see that he is also the *leper* Samaritan; one of the 10 that Jesus just impulsively healed as if warming up his mojo for the day. The filthy Samaritan throws himself on the ground at Jesus feet like he's jumping on a live grenade and then starts wailing in a loud voice praising God and thanking Jesus for what he has done. Wow, this is really awkward.

The man has no dignity. If I were in Jesus sandals, I'd put a stop to this gushing exhibition as soon as I could. It's embarrassing for everyone. But no, Jesus looks around and wonders where the other nine guys went! Does Jesus find this fawning display pleasing? Well kind of, but not how you might think.

Why is it that even when we are genuinely filled with gratitude for what God has given us, expressing it feels so uncomfortable? Maybe because we've all seen that actor who enthusiastically thanks God for awarding him an Oscar, or the celebrity ball player who points toward heaven after crushing a home run. Public displays of gratitude can seem disingenuous or showy. But I think there may be more to our discomfort. To be grateful, truly grateful, like Samaritan grateful forces you to admit that you are not wholly self-sufficient. To be grateful is to know the depth of your need and have no choice but to accept the kind of help that you can never pay back. As privileged people, we are not used to being in that vulnerable role and we will go to astounding lengths to disguise our disability. We're the ones who do the helping. It's not that we are ungrateful, in fact we are grateful to be able to help the other broken people. We faithfully send thank you notes after a dinner party or offer polite appreciation when being honored in some way, but this kind of over the top, spilling over, exuberant gratefulness is a different animal. It is the liberating gratitude that can only come with a certain and sure awareness that somehow this gift, this help, this healing is too good for me. I am completely undeserving and yet here it is anyway. I think this is what the Samaritan leper was feeling.

Most everyone will experience moments in which this kind of gratitude wells up from deep within. Certainly, the birth of a child will bring it on. Falling in love can evoke that kind of joy. Some of us have experienced transcendent moments of gratitude when we somehow are awakened to the oneness of all things and our connectedness to it. It begins when a deep joy begins to percolate within us as if something was filling up our soul, but we don't immediately have words for it. And then there comes a point where the heart overflows, and we sing or cry or dance. Unbridled thanksgiving simply pours out and finds its articulation.

It's like we are a vessel that is quietly filling up until it overflows, and when that happens, it starts to make some noise, and it sparkles, and it ripples down. And that is when the real joy comes. This is the "great fullness" of gratefulness. For gratitude to be fully alive, it needs to find an outlet. Our thankfulness must be named and articulated to find its great fullness.

I have noticed in my life that the times I'm spilling over with gratitude is linked directly times of need or fear of losing something valuable. I remember distinctly the heart pounding exuberant joy I felt leaving the doctor's office when I was told that the radiation treatments had worked. The cancer was gone. I felt like the healthiest person on earth! Or the time I received my master's degree at 51 years old, and my mother was there to witness the miracle. I imagine you have your own stories of being rescued or beating the odds. But here is the secret. We don't have to beat cancer to live in the perpetual joy that fuels a grateful heart. The problem is that so often our heart fills up with joy, with gratefulness, and just at the moment when it wants to overflow and find its fullness, we see a commercial a newer, better iPhone, or your neighbor drives up with her new Tesla model S. Suddenly, instead of overflowing, we make the bowl bigger and bigger and bigger, and it never overflows because we're chasing the next thing.

Psychologists call this our cognitive bias. It's a systematic way of thinking that affects our choices and distorts our thinking. Our reference points for happiness are established by an imagined future. When that future doesn't pan out, or is just out of reach, we become resentful, envious and bitter. We take so much for granted that our deepest gratitude lies silent and dormant until we need to be rescued from drowning before we know joy.

But here's the good news; we all have the ability to choose different reference points. As the prophet Sheryl Crow said, "It's not having what you want, it's wanting what you've got." We all have the agency to determine the reference points that affect our outlook. Studies have proven that grateful people are healthier physically and mentally. Grateful people have a significantly higher sense of well-being than even moderately grateful people. To consciously be grateful is the key to a happy life. When our gratefulness is undermined by a cognitive bias, no matter what happens, we will want something else or something more.

So, I think this is what Jesus was getting at when he looked around for the other 9 healed lepers. He wanted them to know the gift of the great fullness. He wanted their joy to overflow in exuberant praise and thanksgiving for what God had done, but instead, they were off to the next thing and totally missed out on the blessing God was offering them.

We are all offered the healing balm of gratitude. It is the easiest spiritual practice there is. You can start right now and reap immediate measurable results. Brother David Steindl-

Rast offers a practice he calls, “**Stop, Look, Go**”<sup>1</sup>. He says the first thing we have to do is stop rushing around, consumed by tight schedules and encroaching deadlines. The practice of gratitude always begins in being present to the moment you are in. But because we are moving so fast, we totally miss the invitation right in front of us. Step 1. STOP – even for 10 seconds. Stop.

STEP 2, LOOK: Once you stop, you look. What is an opportunity for gratitude at this very moment. Behold the beauty and abundance that is right before you. Behold this person or people you get to be with. If you have eyes to see, you will find gratitude in simply turning on a faucet. Joy will bubble up simply in putting on a warm sweater against the chill of the day. Great fullness will come as you are caught up and present to the blessing of simply eating an orange. Gratitude and thanksgiving are always a choice and continually in front of us. We just have to stop and look.

STEP 3, GO: When we have stopped long enough to see the opportunity before us in this never-to-be-repeated, unique moment, we must act on it. Share your gratefulness with someone. Don’t hold your appreciation for someone in. Tell them! Let your great fullness easily spill out from your soul. I know it feels risky and maybe even betrays your vulnerability, but apart from articulating your thankfulness you will never know the extent and fullness of a grateful heart. STOP, LOOK, GO.

To practice gratitude is always a choice. Even in the swirl of disease and disaster, a grateful heart will reset the imagined cognitive reference points from an imagined reality to the wondrous reality that is always right before us. It turns what we have into more than enough. It transforms denial into acceptance, brings new order out of chaos, and anchors the soul in a sustainable peace. Gratitude is the master key that unlocks the fullness of life and produces a joy that is synonymous with prayer. This is how your faith has made you well.

Whenever you want, in every situation in life you always have the choice to return & praise God. This is how you too will know the GREAT FULLNESS that God has set before us.  
AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness