

The Importance of Gratitude

10-9-22

(Luke 17:11-19; 2 Timothy 2:8-15)

This morning's Gospel reading is about Gratitude and works well with Thanksgiving time. But gratitude is such an important sentiment, that there is no reason why we shouldn't dwell on it now.

The last sentence of the second reading also gives us a way of exploring gratitude, by giving us the opportunity to think about the relationship between truthfulness and gratitude.

Here is Paul's advice to Timothy (in the second reading):

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, because you rightly explain the word of truth (moderate paraphrase)

Paul cares about Timothy, and wants him to know how important it is in God's eyes, that he be truthful in the way he relates to the world, because God's approval is for those who dedicate themselves to responding rightly to the way things really are.

I think that this is a good segue into the Gospel reading on gratitude, because it seems to me that there is relationship between gratitude

and a commitment to being truthful; that a person's gratitude or lack of gratitude is an indicator of that person's relationship with the truth.

The Gospel Reading

In the Gospel reading, ten people are plagued by leprosy. They encounter Jesus, and keeping the required "social distancing" from him, cry out to him for healing. Jesus gives them instructions, and as they carry out his instructions, they are made clean. Then only one, a foreigner, seeing that he has been healed, returns to throw himself at Jesus's feet in an expression of gratitude. Then Jesus asks: "Were not ten made clean? The other nine, where are they?"

I guess you could call this either a pessimistic story or just a realistic observation. Only one of the ten was diligent enough to acknowledge the truth of what had happened and responded appropriately. And the truth was that all ten of them were living a life of terrible suffering and isolation, a life without hope, until they were healed by Jesus; by the hand of God. And an expression of gratitude was clearly in order.

They all knew this, but only one, the Samaritan, (the immigrant) responded rightly in accordance with this truth. The rest all found some way to bend that truth in order to make not going back to say

thank you seem acceptable. Or maybe some were so busy enjoying what they had received that they just forgot to go back.

Entitlement

A number of years ago, when I was living in Hawaii, I was invited to the apartment of an old high school friend. He lived in a nice apartment near Diamond head, overlooking Waikiki Beach. He had obviously done very well for himself.

Several of us classmates sat around the table and he started belly-aching about how the young people he was hiring all behaved as though they were “entitled”. That somehow, they thought they deserved big paychecks right from the start and that they should be treated like rising stars. He wondered what happened to the understanding that you have to work hard to demonstrate your worth, in order to reap the benefits.

There were some grunts of agreement from the identically middle-aged men gathered around the table. And some comments were made about how hard we worked in the old days, just to get a toehold in the company, and how we had to earn our promotions.

It was an interesting conversation and it did seem to me that it is a convenient argument to make once you already have an apartment in

Waikiki and your employee is asking for a raise. And I think there are a lot of people in this country who are rightfully angry, because they are not being paid what they should be.

But I did agree with one aspect of his argument, and that is that many of us have enjoyed the good life for so long that we take for granted that we are entitled to have everything go well. I mean that, as Americans, we don't realize that just being middle class in this country is equivalent to being very well off in many other countries. And we get very angry, when we are inconvenienced. We feel ungrateful because we take the amazing infrastructure that supports us for granted. And I think that the failure to appreciate this, extends to people of all ages.

Have you ever heard someone say, "I am entirely a self-made person. I did it all on my own?" This statement is often made by the most hard-working people; people who do deserve to be rewarded. But believing that it is an accurate statement reveals a high degree of ingratitude and a problematic relationship with the truth.

The truth is that none of us did it all on our own. Some of us may have felt uncared for as a child. But the fact is that someone cared enough to go to the trouble of feeding us. We may have burned the midnight oil studying at school when everyone else was sleeping, but there was still a teacher who went to the trouble of directing our learning and

without whom we would not have succeeded. We may have made our own meals and poured our own glasses of water, but someone produced that food and someone else ensured that the water was safe to drink. We may have driven ourselves to work and back day after day. But somebody else built and maintained that road. We may have worked hard on the job and earned our paychecks, but somebody else created the position we filled. Clearly there is no such thing as a person who did it all on their own.

And yet it is a common sentiment in our society that we have no-one to thank for what we have other than our own hard work. It is a kind of self-deception, a disconnection from the truth about how things are that allows us to entertain a sense of ingratitude; and self-righteousness about not giving back, when we have received so much.

Our Health Care Workers

Consider our health care infrastructure. I mention it because it fits in an interesting way with the Gospel reading. Isn't it interesting that the lepers stood at a distance from Jesus and called out to him for healing.

It easily recalls to our minds the earlier phases of the Corona virus pandemic and the mandatory "social distancing." And the story also prompts us to consider from whence our help came.

It came from health care workers and scientists. Do you remember the tv footage of doctors and nurses and orderlies, dressed in mountains of protective gear caring for people lying on gurneys? Did you know that 3600 health care workers died of Covid in the first year of the epidemic in this country, most of them under the age of 60? Do you remember how frightening it was that we did not understand or have the tools to tame this terrible disease? Do you remember how agonizing it was for many health care workers to decide whether to keep working and take the risk? None of them thought that becoming a nurse would be a life threatening occupation.

I remember one news program that followed a nurse who was working long hours in an overwhelmed hospital, while living apart from her family, in order to protect her own children from possible infection? And do you remember how the scientific establishment underwent a herculean struggle against time to come up with and test a vaccine?

And now, only three and a half years after the virus first entered this country, most of us who are vaccinated have little to worry about other than that we may experience a moderate flu or less. Imagine where we would be today, were it not for the heroic efforts of the people in our medical establishment. I wonder how many people make a point of expressing their gratitude, when they encounter health care workers

or, for that matter, the many other people who took personal risks to keep us safe and keep our economy going during that time. How often do we think of the gratitude we owe them?

And yet, as deserving of our gratitude as so many people are, we lose sight of an even more fundamental and deserving object of our gratitude, if we allow ourselves to stop there. Because, it seems to me that the major driving force behind the push to overcome the virus and end the suffering, originated in the mystery of God's love present in people's hearts; a love that drove people to transcend their own self-interest and make great personal sacrifices. And so our expressions of gratitude ultimately should be made to God.

And when we think about it, we realize that everything we are and have, everyone we know, everything we eat, the brilliance of scientists, the compassion of doctors and nurses, all of it originates in the mystery of God's providence. Believing that you or I are self-made, apart from others, is one kind of self-deception.

But an even greater self-deception lies in believing that humankind is self-made and has done everything for itself, apart from God who created us. So that, if we consider the reality of our situation, how all of us are, in truth, dependent for all things on the grace of God, then central to our lives should be the desire to return to say thank you, not

only to the people around us, but to the God without whom none of it is possible.

I think that gratitude is one of the most positive and healthy emotions that a person can have. There is something very powerful about being truthful and sincere in the expression of gratitude and something even more powerful about being able to express it out loud to the one to whom we owe it. So that, it is no wonder that the one who returned to Jesus fell down, so overcome was he by the experience of salvation that came to him in that moment.

And perhaps that is one of the best reasons for why churches like ours exist. Because people who really know what has been done for them, need a place where, they can return, in order to say thank you publicly, not only for what others have done for them, but ultimately for what God has done. And one day, I pray that for all of us, in spite of the hardships, in spite of the confusions and losses, and because of the love we have known and lived, the last words to leave our lips as we enter into the fullness of God, might be those two words, "Thank you."

