

A LIFE OF GRATITUDE      JULY 17, 2016      LUKE 17:11-19

As most of you have heard, the premise of this series of sermons is that the clergy members of the staff share our life Scripture verses with you. When Karen Nyhart preached last week, I recognized a couple of points of commonality with her in this task: First, although I preach infrequently, I too have already preached on my guiding scripture verse, which is simply “God is Love” from first John.\* Further, every time I preach here, that verse is my basic message! So today– since my husband Cliff and I recently celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary (you are supposed to gasp and say, “How can that possibly be?”) But I digress: the past couple of months have been a time of reflection in which the theme for me has been gratitude for God’s love in my life. So – today, I am choosing to concentrate on my favorite response to my life verse: that being gratitude\*

We chose to celebrate our anniversary by renewing our vows with family and a few longtime friends. I found that as the renewal approached, it got clearer to me that our marriage has really been the biggest blessing in my life and I wanted to say that to Cliff with those closest to us as witnesses. That does not mean we haven’t had ups and downs in our 50 years – we certainly have. But as I have sometimes said to newlyweds in weddings I perform: I hope that at the end of your lives you may be able to say to one another, “With you I have become the person I wanted to be\* \*and have lived the life I wanted to live”\*. I truly felt able to say that to Cliff at our celebration. And in that process, it struck me I wish I had lived more of my marriage, my life in general, in that same state of gratitude.

My second commonality with what Karen said last week may have to do with our both being mothers in that I also planned to talk about nightly prayer time with

my children when they were growing up. \* Karen's approach may have been a bit gentler in that she asked her children to just think about a favorite part of the day; at the end of our prayer time, I asked my sons to say thank you to God for something specific in the day. My point, of course was that no matter how their day had gone, they had something for which to be thankful. Some days that part of the prayer was a struggle for them. That is true for all of us – some days are not ones in which we readily look back in thanksgiving. Indeed, there are seasons in our lives for which we feel anything but grateful. But the idea I wanted to share then and now is that we can still **chose** gratitude – whatever is going on in our lives on a particular day or a particular season, we can choose the good, we can find things for which to be thankful.

This morning's scripture is a variation of that same theme. It is a story of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, when he sees 10 lepers. They cry out to him for help\* He tells them to go and see the priest. On their way, they are healed. Afterwards, one leper, the foreigner in the group, seeing that he is healed, comes back to thank Jesus profusely. Wondering where the other nine are, Jesus says to the one who returned, "your faith has made you well"\*

There are several ramifications to this story. First, it is important to put it in context. It is actually near the end of a section of the Gospel of Luke which begins with Chapter 9:51. Speaking of favorite scripture verses, Luke 9:51 is one of my very favorite: it says "When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem"\* The significance is that Jesus knew what was waiting for him in Jerusalem: arrest, condemnation and death. But knowing that he was called to follow that path, he made a deliberate choice: he set his face toward

Jerusalem, toward willing self-sacrifice. Today's passage is 8 chapters later, chapters full of Jesus seeing the needs of others and reaching out to them, teaching, healing and praising God while on the way to that fate in Jerusalem. He chooses to continue responding to others in spite of his circumstances, in spite of what lies ahead.

It is a story of seeing beyond our situation: in Jesus' day, lepers were outcasts – they were required to keep away from non-lepers. But Jesus sees them, hears their cry for mercy and decides to stop and heal them. He tells them to go to the priest because it is their priest who will determine when they are in fact healed and can declare them clean and therefore able to rejoin their community: *a very big deal!* But only one of the lepers, interestingly, the foreigner, who is a total outsider and who *even* when healed, will not be welcome in the Jewish community, is the only one who runs back, falls at Jesus' feet and thanks him over and over.\* Jesus then declares that he is truly healed – the one who has truly been saved. **He is saved by his faith and his gratitude!**

This is a story about seeing for us as well. When we see the gift of God's great love for us – isn't gratitude the logical response – to in some way, say thank you for the gift we want and need? The lepers *wanted* to be cured of their afflictions and called on Jesus because they recognized him as a source of help and power. And Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem and suffering, sees the need of the lepers and chooses to stop and respond. What does their failure to say thank you tell us? Their mothers didn't teach them to say thank you? Perhaps they believed a cure was their right. As Jews, who had been cured, they could rejoin the community – and believing it was their due, thought no thanks was needed.\* Or is it that

tendency of human nature, to take things for granted once our crisis has past? Once things are again going well? But Jesus says that the outsider, the Samaritan, the one who when healed, acknowledged the gift, is the only one who is truly faithful, truly healthy because gratitude makes us healthier.

So, how do we, who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, personally follow the example of the lone leper in the story? One of the things it suggests is that especially in those times when our circumstances are difficult and we call on God to help, we need to stop and look for the ways in which God has already acted in our lives. 6 years ago, a friend of mind died of a recurrence of oral cancer after having a 5-year remission from the disease. His was a slow and painful death, but right after the recurrence showed up, he and his wife had “every day is a blessing”\* painted on their living room wall – and they thanked God for something every day up to his death a year later. They witnessed to a life of gratitude to everyone who entered their home.

When I was first doing Christian Education in the church, the official goal of Christian Education from the Board of Discipleship basically said that the goal was to help us understand the love of God and how we might in gratitude respond to that love in the world. **I love that:** the church needs to help us understand God’s great love for us so that in grateful response, we live a life of love before God.\* Doesn’t that make sense – that whether things are going well for us or are not, we chose to live a life of gratitude for God’s love for us in all seasons?

Because I strongly believe that God’s ultimate nature is love, I know that God always wants healing and wholeness for us. And choosing gratitude moves us toward wholeness, whatever our circumstances. The gospel lesson this morning

tells us that we are the freest from whatever afflicts us when we are grateful. It bears noting here that the words healing, healthy, wholeness and holy all come from the same root word.

Among us today, there are those of you who have recent losses, many of you are contending with illness, some have lost jobs, some have troubled relationships, difficult work environments or serious financial problems. If you are in one of those difficult situations, where do you feel God and others sustaining you? If you are facing illness, are there doctors and others acting as instruments of healing for you? Who is supporting you? Who treats you with compassion? Have you stopped to thank them?

If your relationships and work are going well and you are financially secure and healthy have you taken all that for granted or do you regularly thank those who help sustain you? In general, are you living a life of gratitude? Are prayers of thanksgiving a daily part of your life (even if your mother doesn't make you do that?) How often do you come to church truly praising God for gifts you have? \* How do acknowledge those around you who love and support you? In gratitude for the plenty you enjoy, do you share your bounty with those in need? If you are in a difficult time in your life and cannot respond in some of the ways I've just mentioned, have you stopped to give thanks for what God has already brought you through?

As Karen did last week, I too had planned to ask you to review your day before bed tonight (or use the white board in the narthex for the children) Sometime today, look to see how you were supported or sustained and like the lone Samaritan in the gospel, stop to thank Jesus. And Cliff, I want this opportunity to

say in front **all** these additional witnesses: our marriage continues to be the greatest blessing of my life\* I thank God today and all days for your presence in my life. In doing pastoral care, I know that there will inevitably be are losses ahead for us, but *whatever* our future brings, I shall always be grateful. AMEN.