

JEREMIAH 29:1, 4-7

PSALM 66:1-12

2 TIMOTHY 2:8-15

LUKE 17:11-19

Sermon for October 9, 2022

THE GRATITUDE OF FAITH

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Faith is not a feeling or a belief; it's a condition of the spirit.

I suppose you've all heard the one about a man who is driving around the streets of New York City at 2 AM, looking for a parking space. The only way to find a parking space in New York is if someone pulls out of one, and no one is pulling out of a parking space at 2 AM.

Finally after two hours of driving around, the man is at the end of his rope. He stops the car, puts his head on his steering wheel, and prays:

“Lord, please find me a parking space. If you do, I’ll contribute \$100 to the church this Sunday.”

Immediately a car pulls out of its parking space, right in front of him.

The man immediately says,

“Never mind, Lord, I found one.”

Ingratitude and lack of gratitude seem like fundamental elements of human nature, don't they? The episode from Luke's gospel pretty much typifies the way most of us respond most of the time when something good happens to us.

Think of the way we so often neglect to show our appreciation to our parents. There's a very sad woman in the hospice residence right now, whose daughter emptied out her bank account once the woman was moved into hospice care, so this woman is now spending the last stage of her life nursing a terrible bitterness towards her own daughter, the little girl who once sat on her knee.

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is, to have a thankless child, as King Lear famously said, and a deeper and harder truth has seldom been uttered.

But we don't need to look at such an extreme case to recognize a similar lack of gratitude in ourselves, do we? For every one of us, there was a period of years in our lives when even a week's neglect would have killed us. These were the years when we were dependent on our parents for literally everything, and yet how forgetful of that obligation we so often become as we move into our own adulthood.

And the same is so often true of our attitudes towards those who help us as we move through life, our friends and neighbors, our teachers, our doctors, even the men and women who repair our plumbing and pave our streets and defend our country. Oh sure, we pay them, but is an amount of money really a measure or expression of gratitude? Suppose the other nine lepers had written a check and mailed it to Jesus. Would that have removed his grounds for disappointment?

And that brings us to the real point of the episode recorded in Luke's gospel. We must never forget that everything Jesus did and said was done and said in the person of God Incarnate. His words are God's words; his attitudes are God's attitudes; his actions are the actions of God.

In studying Jesus, we are first and foremost studying God. But we certainly do indirectly learn a great deal about humanity by studying Christ. We learn what God's opinion of humanity is, how God deals with humanity based on that opinion, what God expects of humanity and what God seeks to encourage in humanity. And clearly one thing that God seeks to encourage in humanity is an appreciation of the depth and width and height of our indebtedness to someone outside of and greater than ourselves.

Ten lepers pray for healing, and as they walk away they all find themselves free of leprosy. Nine of them continue on their way rejoicing to offer their signs of respect to the priests; the tenth returns to Jesus to offer his respects to the one who had healed him. And to that tenth man, Jesus says: "Your faith has made you well."

But the Greek that Luke uses here can be understood in different ways. The remark might just as well have been translated: *Your faith has made you complete*; or even better, *You are now complete in your faith*.

It is not the physical health of the tenth leper that Jesus was talking about; after all, the other nine were also made physically well. What Jesus is talking about is his spiritual health, and what he's saying is that the tenth leper's spirit is healthy, that the entirety of the man's attitude and behavior that day are what Christ is looking for, what God is looking for and seeking to encourage.

A great deal of misguided thought when it comes to understanding Jesus is due to the fact that Jesus, like all the rest of us, had to use words to communicate things that words are simply not capable of communicating. And I don't mean only the difficulty that Jesus spoke in Aramaic, that the gospels writers translated his Aramaic into Greek, so that most of us read English translations of the Greek translations of the Aramaic, although that certainly does present difficulties.

What I'm referring to is a problem with language that goes much deeper than even that. The fact is that words are very crude and inadequate instruments for conveying anything but the most basic forms of information.

Consider how a singer can take an essentially simple or ever corny poem and turn it into a heart-wrenching love song or lament, simply through her voice. It's not the words that are communicating the heartache or the pathos, it's the singer's voice and presence and attitude.

The greatest poet can't even begin to convey the fullness and reality of even a simple experience of a sunset over the ocean, for example. Compared to the richness and texture and depth and flavor of life, words are very, very thin gruel indeed.

The English word we use to refer to the attitude, the way of being, that Jesus and God are looking for and trying to encourage is *faith*, but what is that? It's only a little English word. But what is the way of being that it names? What is the substance, the life, the reality of that way of being?

The ten lepers asked Jesus for help. They in effect were praying to him for help. In the culture of that time, part of the isolation to which lepers were condemned would have required them to maintain a good distance from the non-contaminated,

so they would certainly have been calling to him from a distance. From other gospel accounts we know that Jesus had no fear of leprosy, so he would certainly have walked towards them and spoken to them in a normal voice. Perhaps he even touched them individually, although Luke's account doesn't share that detail. And they all received his gift of healing. Their prayer was answered.

But the tenth leper returns and prostrates himself before Jesus, and Jesus says of him alone: This man, in spirit, is closer to whole than the others. His blessing was no greater than theirs, but Jesus isn't blessing him here: he's acknowledging something about the man, he's calling our attention to him and saying, in effect, Look, this man, in spirit, is farther along the path towards God than these others. Call it faith, call it a Christian heart, call it anything you like: Call it Rumpelstiltskin, if you want. The word doesn't matter. What matters is his coming to me for help, and returning to me in understanding gratitude for companionship and further guidance. That's what heaven on earth is.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul is also talking about the attitude we as Christians are to seek to cultivate in ourselves:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (4: 6)

We all give lip service from time to time to a sort of generalized sentiment about how we are dependent on God to meet our needs and to provide special blessings, and how grateful we are for this and that. But how many of us really lead our lives in the steady and unwavering awareness that everything we do and everything we have, every meal we consume and every breath we take, everything that ever happened to us to brighten our hearts, is a gift from God?

Precious few of us, I would think, if we're being honest with ourselves. I certainly don't. A year or two ago, I made an attempt to start training myself in developing at least one element of the attitude like the one Paul recommends. I set the alarm on my phone to ding three times a day: at one o'clock, at five o'clock, and at eight o'clock. And my commitment was that whenever my phone dinged me, I would stop and think about the circumstances I was in right then and there, and find a few things in those circumstances to thank God for.

That sounds all pious and holier-than-thou, doesn't it? You know how long it lasted? Maybe a month or two, and then I just let the whole experiment dissipate. Too much work, too artificial, too mechanical, I told myself. Just too darn hard and boring and goody-two-shoes to be grateful all the time. So it turns out that, when actually put to the test, I'm afraid I'm much more like the nine lepers than the one who returned.

And there's the heart of the problem. A while ago we took note of the fact that there is a deep human tendency towards ingratitude, or perhaps I should say, towards a lack of gratitude. It is a central part of the fabric of who we are as human beings. It's not even the worst part, but it is a central part.

In Biblical terms, we are fallen creatures. In non-Biblical terms, we are uncharitable, greedy, prideful, self-centered, violent, envious, deceitful, insecure, quarrelsome, rancorous, boastful, frequently malevolent, gossipy and, yes, ungrateful creatures: that's the raw material Jesus and God have to work with: a malodorous stew with a few sweet-smelling ingredients mixed in. We are fallen creatures. All of us. There is none of us righteous, no, not one.

Am I exaggerating? Maybe a little, for effect. But the point is, no matter how much spiritual progress we seem to ourselves to have made towards the goal of imitating Christ, from God's point of view, we are all of us still babies still making the first efforts at standing upright. The very greatest temptation and danger for those who have made a conscious decision to follow Christ, still more so for those who have determined to represent Christ, is self-satisfaction.

The image that often comes to my own mind when thinking about these things is someone looking down at an anthill. From the point of view of the ants, there are certainly tremendous differences among themselves. Some are stronger, some are better-looking, some are kinder, some are leaders and some are followers, some are spiritual guides and others are moral laggards, some are saints and some are sinners.

But from the point of view of the person looking down, all the ants look pretty much the same.

And so our sermon prayer this morning, Father, is that you open our eyes to the true state of our lives, that you help us be aware, not of how far we've come, but of how far we have to go, and what a wonderful journey of discovery that can be. Help us realize our own helplessness. Help us to accept the assistance and

guidance of Christ the way a child accepts the help and guidance of a parent, with a gratitude that appears in our trustful acceptance rather than glib and pious words, and with an openness to loving obedience like that shown to you by Christ himself, in whose name we pray.