

October 9, 2016
21st Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 17:11-19
The Rev. Carenda Baker

I have just finished a book I would commend for your reading. The book is called *The Gratitude Diaries*, written by Janice Kaplan. Kaplan, a magazine editor, TV producer, writer and journalist took on the challenging experiment of intentionally living with gratitude for an entire year. This book is a combination of her personal experiences with this experiment, and her interviews with many different people from all sorts of professions and varied circumstances in life. The entire book shares the impact the practice of gratitude can have on our overall well-being, and how those effects ripple out to touch and change others.

If Kaplan had turned to the Christian scriptures in search of a noteworthy example for her book, she might have included today's gospel reading. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with the disciples, when ten lepers approach him. They are careful to stay at a safe distance. From that distance they call out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!". Jesus doesn't approach them or touch them or say 'your sins are forgiven', as happens in some of the other healing stories. This time Jesus simply gives the direction to go and show themselves to the priests.

A person designated as a "leper" at that time would have included those with a variety of skin ailments, like psoriasis or eczema, as well as full blown leprosy, which today we refer to as Hansen's disease – which is a more serious long-lasting, contagious skin infection that at its worst can result in ulcers, nerve damage, and paralysis. It was the priest's job to examine persons with these skin ailments, to determine whether the condition was serious enough to warrant segregation and living apart from the rest of the community to maintain purity, or whether the condition was minor so the person could be restored to live normally amid the community. The priest was the one responsible for pronouncing an official "clean bill of health" to persons who had been ill.

So obediently, dutifully and faithfully, the ten head off to the temple, as Jesus directed. On the way there, they are "made clean" – all ten of them cured of their leprosy. Up until that point, this group of ten had been their own small, contained, ritually unclean band of "outsiders", socially and religiously kept at a safe distance from close human interaction.

Well on the way to the temple, one of those ten lepers makes a life-changing choice. He sees that he has been healed, so he turns back, praising God very openly, enthusiastically and loudly, even likely making a bit of a public spectacle of himself. When he reaches Jesus, he falls to the ground on his face at Jesus' feet and thanks him.

Now there is no reason for us to assume that the other nine lepers who continued on their way to the temple to see the priest were ungrateful. They were being good and faithful religious folks who obeyed the religious authorities and laws. They did exactly what Jesus told them to do. Can you imagine how excited they must have been to look down and see their own clear unblemished skin restored? Some of them probably broke into a run, making their way as fast as they could to the temple to be examined by the priest.

After that it would be back to their friends and families, and – finally – time to get on with their lives. Some of them might even have tried later, to find Jesus to say thank you. We don't know exactly what the nine did. But this is not really a story about ingratitude. It is not a text intended to shame us for not returning and giving thanks.

Rather, this is a story of an awakening and a personal encounter with the holy God, Source of life, goodness, and love. This tenth leper has been a “double outsider”, socially outcast as a leper and also religiously outcast as a Samaritan among Jews – the tenth leper is the despised “other”. He will never be a welcome part of the “in” group among faithful Jews. So, there was no reason for him to go to the temple. He would not have been welcomed there.

Organized religion in that place, at that time, had nothing to offer him. But upon seeing that his body is free of disease, all symptoms of leprosy gone, he chooses in that moment to respond, but not by hurrying home to his family and friends, resuming his life as it had been. As he goes back to the place where he met Jesus, he still will be seen as an outsider to the crowd around Jesus. But at this point, he has nothing to lose by turning around, and seeking out the man who made it possible for him to simply be a human being again, a healthy and whole human being. Ten lepers were cured. And one was healed. The tenth was saved and sent on his way to take up a life that would never be the same again.

The Samaritan leper went back to the holy Giver and worshiped. He became a “thanks giver”. Martin Luther was once asked about the nature of worship and he replied that to worship is to be the 10th leper. Gratitude is a turning of the heart, mind, and will toward God, who is the source of all things good. And gratitude is a choice. Many times a day we have the opportunity to choose to turn around. We can deliberately choose to turn

toward God – the source of life and all good – to turn in gratitude, to be thanks givers. And we can also choose to go on our own way, telling ourselves that we are entitled to certain things in life. We can go the way of self-concern and remain focused on all manner of things that help prop up our egos. We can go the way of keeping God safely manageable out there on the periphery of our lives, rather than dynamically active and present at the very center, in every part of our lives.

For many years I have periodically prayed, asking God for a deeper sense of gratitude. A big part of me has wanted, and still at times, wants to “feel” grateful, to naturally and spontaneously feel good about every bit of life. I have come to know that this is not realistic or possible. Painful, unexpected, devastating and heart-breaking things happen in life. If I’m really honest, part of me has wanted God to make life easy. I still grapple with this, but I am coming to see that we can choose to think and act in gratitude, no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in. Gratitude is not an inborn trait that some have and others don’t. Gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time. And it can be a real challenge for anyone who is a “glass is half empty” kind of person. Some of us just naturally notice what’s missing, what’s not there in life that we want to be there. It takes resolve and intentionality to flip that “mental switch” in any circumstance to reframe what we see, to find something for which to be grateful – to see that “the glass is forever half full”.

Gratitude becomes easier to choose as we practice it. And this is the piece of the puzzle that I had been missing! I had not realized how crucial the regular practice of gratitude is to becoming a more fully committed and intimate disciple of Christ. I have yearned to live a “Eucharistic life” – a life marked by thanksgiving, no matter the circumstances I face, no matter what I am feeling at any given moment. Our dear priest mentor, Robyn Szoke-Coolidge, now Dean of the diocesan Stevenson School for Ministry once said in a sermon that every time she comes to the Eucharist she responds by saying to Jesus – “Thank you. I love you.”

The aim of Eucharistic living is for us to become genuine and wholehearted “*thanks givers*” who are falling more deeply in love with God and being transformed by this love. There will come for each of us at some point, a moment of awareness when we recognize our deep connection with God, an “aha” moment when we see and experience that divine image and spark of love alive in our own hearts. It happened for the tenth leper who turned back to give thanks to Jesus. He was made whole and restored to fullness of life. And the most appropriate response he could make at that moment was to worship God, the Giver and source of his healing and renewed life.

God is the ultimate Giver. We are the thanks givers. Today as we come to the table and hold out our hands to receive the real presence of Christ, ponder that simple response: Lord, "THANK YOU. I LOVE YOU."

And then let's go and try a little experiment this week. When someone speaks to you and says, "How are you?" – pause for a moment, and then say "I'm grateful".

This will initially be a challenge for most of us. Things might be tough for us right now, and it might be very hard to find something for which to be grateful. So it's okay if we can't offer that response. But for those of us inclined to automatically respond - "I'm fine", when someone asks that question – "How are you?" – let's pause, take a breath and say – "I'm grateful". Because do you know what will happen when we start offering that response? We will begin to write our very own distinct news headlines. Can you see it: ***"Thanks givers have been widely seen flourishing". "Gratitude being expressed openly is resulting in eruptions of gladness and joy". "Murmurs of 'thank you' and 'I love you' are breaking open hearts, and blessing upon blessing, grace upon grace is spilling over into the world"***.

Now THOSE are headlines I will be THRILLED to see and hear. So let's begin right now – and watch those headlines start to shape reality. And let's do just one more bit of practice:

(Priest): "HOW ARE YOU?" (Congregation): **"I AM GRATEFUL."** Amen.