

"Stewarding Abundance"

A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – October 9, 2022

Please Read:

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7

Luke 17:11-19

Did you hear about the Episcopal priest, the Rev. David Sibley, rector of St. Paul's Church in Walla Walla, Washington, who won \$79,098 dollars in prize money on the game show *Jeopardy* which aired last week? Apparently, the guy is a trivia genius. What was interesting, though, is that he made a point of going on social media to explain why he was tithing ten per cent of his winnings to the church.

“Quite simply, I’m doing well on *Jeopardy* because of the gifts given me to remember lots of stuff and recall it quickly. It’s part of who I am, and who God made me to be. So the proceeds of that? None of it is really mine to begin with. It’s all God’s. So giving a tenth of it back to God’s work through St. Paul’s Walla Walla is an act of trust in what God has done, what God will do, and a way for me to grow spiritually through that trust.”

It was also inspiring that he used his 15 minutes of fame to tweet “I’m sure the occupation of ‘Episcopal Priest’ is traumatizing or triggering for some *Jeopardy* fans, so I want to be unequivocally clear: this priest is affirming of the lives, loves and vocations of LGBTQIA+ people.” Wow. Sermon over! Seriously, today I invite you to reflect with me on gratitude, and how the Gospel lesson has a unique lesson for us about why we ...*give... thanks...* at all.

Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, was traveling through the border country between Samaria and Galilee. He entered into a small village and ten lepers approached him. Lepers, of course, in Jesus' day and for long afterward were outcasts from mainstream society. Leprosy (also called Hansen's Disease) was believed to be highly contagious, so lepers were required to live outside the normal city limits. They could not work or participate socially with the rest of society. They were completely dependent on charity for their sustenance while their disease, untreated, consumed their bodies and disfigured their faces. Leprosy has the effect of numbing the nerves, so that in the last stages, the leper feels nothing on the skin. Those suffering from the disease literally lose touch with reality. The small crowd of lepers who met Jesus that day would have been ragged, deformed, unfeeling and undernourished; everyone else on the scene would have been horrified by their appearance. And from their place as outcasts, they called to Jesus for healing.

What a repulsive, yet beautiful image - these lame outcasts turning to Jesus for healing and love. It is primarily the outcasts of society who laid claim to Jesus' healing power. The sick, scorned, rejected, lonely, misunderstood, powerless people were the ones to whom Jesus typically ministered first.

I know that most of us here would consider ourselves to be upstanding citizens of New Canaan, in one of the wealthiest counties in the country. Indeed, most of us here have ways and means to live and live well. We would not normally think of ourselves as outcasts or outsiders. But consider the possibility that we are here this morning because we sense deep down in our hearts and minds that we are dependent on God to give our lives any real meaning and worth. Consider the possibility that we need to be here; that we know as deeply as we know anything at all that life without saying thank you to God is simply not worth living at all.

We may have more in common with the ten lepers of Luke's story than we realize. Jesus sends the lepers off to the priests. By ancient law and custom the priests were empowered to determine who was a leper and who was not. And on the way, the lepers were physically cured.

The ten lepers experienced Jesus' life-giving power throughout their bodies with a sudden directness, as Jesus whom they called Master made them clean again. And for the ten it meant not only the cure of their disease and an end to their disfigurement, but also restoration back into the community, their families, and their occupation. They could touch and be touched. They could once again feel. They had been given back the gift of life. God met them in their extremity and restored them. Jesus had graciously made them physically healthy.

But strangely only one of the lepers turned back and gave thanks to Jesus. And this one was a Samaritan, one who though cleansed in his body would always be an outcast among the religious people of Jesus' day. He was a foreigner, a heretic, a traitor to the ancient faith of Israel. So long as the ten were united in their misery, it apparently didn't make any difference who was a Jew or a Samaritan; they lived together as lepers. But now that they were all healed, the old discriminations became important again, Luke points out, though with a twist; the one who is still the alien outcast is the one who turns back and gives thanks to Jesus.

This act of saying thank you by the Samaritan stuns Jesus and he wonders out loud about the other nine. Where did they go? And in wondering Jesus raises the nagging question of human ingratitude and indifference. It's easy for us to look at the nine lepers with a sense of righteous indignation: these people had been healed of the

worst disease. How could they go off and not thank the very one who made new life possible for them? Why did they not say thank you?

At the beginning of this text are the words, "On the way to Jerusalem..." It is not simply a geographic reference, but Luke's reminder that Jesus was on his way to the Cross. He was heading to Jerusalem in order to shed his blood for the forgiveness of the sins of the world... It is one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith that God's greatest gift of life came by way of vengeful execution at the hands of a thankless and self-absorbed mob. And throughout the centuries since, how many people - including "Christians," have lived a life ignoring the precious gift which God has given?

There are times when I'm not so different from those nine lepers who went on their merry way. Think of all that you take for granted, the gifts you overlook: and I'm not just talking about getting well or being cured, but being warm when it's cold, or being loved when you don't deserve it, or being able to make choices unconstrained by poverty, ignorance, oppression, or warfare.

But this story also discloses the wonderful yet amazing truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The love of God, you see, has nothing to do with how lovable we are or how thankful we are; God is gracious to the creation that he loved into being even when that creation pays little or no attention.

Yet God goes on showering grace on the world regardless, sustaining those who cannot or will not believe in or even acknowledge God's grace. It makes me wonder if it makes any difference being thankful people. What difference does it make to come to worship saying and singing *thank you* to our God? Or, perhaps, are we here just to say *please*?

Tough questions, I'll admit. But I believe there is a difference, and a very important one. Jesus said to the Samaritan leper, "*Your faith has made you well.*" It is easily missed in the English, but there is a difference in the Greek words used here. All ten were made *clean*, but only the one who turned back and gave thanks was made *well*. It would seem Jesus is referring to some additional benefit beyond the physical cure received by all ten lepers. In fact, the verb translated here "made well" (σέσωκέν) is the same word often translated "*to be saved.*"

Another meaning of this word is "to be made whole." It was not only a body that had been healed, but a life and a soul. The one leper who turned back to give thanks was not only healed but realized from where his healing had come. And so, he felt

more than the self-centered elation of the other nine. He felt gratitude; he felt that sense of wholeness and well-being that overflows into thankfulness and turned to give thanks back to God.

Like the lepers on that road to Jerusalem long ago, our world is crying out for healing and a reason to say thanks. Many are broken and abandoned by the roadside, whether in far off places where there is violence and war, or even closer to home where there is discrimination, or illness or loss. And this is also a paradox. Even when we are so rich, we can feel so poor. Living in abundance is not necessarily why we are grateful. Gratitude is a choice. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with our circumstances. Gratitude is an act of faith.

In Thornton Wilder's play, "The Angel That Troubled the Waters," a physician comes to a healing pool hoping to be cured of his melancholy. The pain in his heart is too much for him, and he wants to be liberated. The angel comes to stir waters, but tells the physician that healing isn't intended for him today. It's a crushing blow, until an explanation is offered. The angel tells him:

"Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve."

Gratitude is always a choice, and somehow there is healing even in choosing to give thanks in the midst of suffering, loss, and brokenness. The prophet Jeremiah's words to the Jews who found themselves in Babylonian exile was to choose to live as God's faithful grateful people. Rather than isolate themselves or complain and fight against their oppressor, God tells them to live fully, to seek the welfare (peace) of the city where they live. Plant gardens and put down roots even in a place of alienation and hardship.

Even in the broken and diseased areas of life, there is potential for blessing. Abundance is not so much the result of how much money we put in the bank, but the result of the God in whom we put our trust. The difficult question for each one of us is to ask ourselves is in what areas of our own lives have we the opportunity to practice surprising gratitude and faith? In what areas have we yet to say thank you and experience more fully God's healing grace and mercy?

Some of us, like that Episcopal priest, have been highly successful. Others of us may not feel like we've "won" much of anything. But like those healed lepers, all of us have a choice about saying thank you. It's an act of faith. And in giving thanks, we experience a special blessing and are made well to bless others.

One last thought... The story ends and we don't know what happened to that grateful Samaritan leper. How was his life was changed? Was he inspired to bless those around him? The question for us all is this: God has given everything so that in faith you may be made well, that in faith you may have new and abundant life, that in faith you may be a blessing to others. The gift of salvation is already yours for the taking. The question is, how will you share it?

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.