

It's All About Grace and Gratitude

Psalm 66 & Luke 17:11-19

14th October 2007

The Samaritan who returned rendering thanks to the Lord was actually breaking the Law. Ten lepers healed by Jesus, only one – a “foreigner,” an almost subhuman Samaritan, of all people – returns giving thanks. Where were the other nine? They were on the way to the priests. They were following the Jewish Law that stipulates that the priests needed to first give the “all-clear” in order for a ritually unclean person to rejoin the community. The nine were being dutiful; you can't really blame them for that. Maybe they weren't outwardly thankful, but they were doing what was required of them. They were following the rules, but not the Samaritan, because something else was more important for him.

This community of the outcast, we're told, was made up of all lepers. Leprosy was probably the term for a whole host of skin diseases and not one disease. Whatever it is, it is clear, that these lepers are unclean, cast off from the community, isolated and alone. Scholars are beginning to wonder if perhaps the prevalence of so many skin diseases had something to do with the widespread use of mikva in First Century Judaism.¹ A mikva is a pool of water used for purification, for ritual cleansing required by the Law before eating, in preparation for going to the Temple or worship, or after anything they considered defiling. The wealthy had their own private *mikva'ot* built into their homes. The poor had to share the pools with others. When I was in Israel, we visited all kinds of *mikva'ot*, large and small, in rural Galilee, in Jerusalem, and in Qumran. The one in Qumran was quite large with steps leading down into the pool and a separate set of steps leading out so you didn't touch those on the way into the water. These public pools would have been filled with polluted, stagnant, fetid water, cooking in the blazing heat of the region. No bleach, no chlorine, no filters. The irony here is that going into that water in order to become ritually clean to be acceptable to God was probably not good for one's health, maybe deadly. The irony is that the obsession over ritual purification

¹ Comments by Professor James Charlesworth of Princeton Theological Seminary in Israel, June 2007.

made one sick, that it was toxic. Then and now, religious obsessions, obsessions over legalistic observance, following the rules have a way of being destructive to the soul. Religion can be toxic.

It's destructive and toxic on many levels, not the least psychologically. There's something about that kind of religious observance that sucks the life out of people. There's something about that way of being religious that feels caught, bound, tight. It hinders something within us, holds us back. It forces us back to the chief priest for validation.

But the Samaritan is not held back. He probably doesn't have the same compulsion as his fellow Jews to follow the Law. It's the Samaritan who is free to respond spontaneously, freely, willingly. Is this what Luke is suggesting here with this story, found only in Luke, that "those who stick to the strictures of the Law – and the Law 9 times out of ten ends up being all about you and what you do, what you accomplish, what merit points you rack up on your own – are unlikely candidates for feeling lots of gratitude"?² There's something about expressing thanks, of responding with gratitude that must flow willingly, freely from the heart, with no compulsion. "The Samaritan leper understood that offering up proper gratitude to Jesus was more important than the finer points of this or that regulation in the rule book." Receiving the mercy, the grace of God called forth from within him, joyous gratitude. Gratitude and thanksgiving were bursting out all over. It was not expected or even required. *There's something about grace that does that in us, that calls us to go beyond what is expected, that causes us to cut-loose with praise.*

To know God's grace and *not* respond with gratitude – well, that's simply not wise; it's just plain foolishness. There is built into the universe a cycle of grace and gratitude, a kind of call and response that each yields to the other. To receive God's grace and not respond with thanks breaks the cycle, maybe even somehow disturbs the rhythm of the universe. Ingratitude kills; it hardens the heart, and stifles the human spirit. It stops the flow of grace flowing through our lives. Gratitude, however, completes the act of grace by acknowledging that we have indeed received something that we did not previously own or know. It's

² Center for Excellence in Preaching:

<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewContent.php?iID=116&sID=1>

like giving a gift to someone and not receiving a thank you. We don't give in order to get thank yous (although, some do), but the "Thank you" acknowledges receipt that it was received; makes it real for the giver – and for us. It signifies that we have received a gift.

Where am I going with this? All ten lepers were healed, but Jesus says to the one who said "thank you," "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well." Wasn't he already healed? Now he's made well? The literal reading in Greek is, "your faith has saved you." All then were healed, but there's something in the language Jesus uses here to suggest that maybe just the one who came back to say "thank you," who responded with gratitude to God's grace, was saved in some deeper, truer sense. *Those who truly fathom what it feels like to be on the receiving end of God's grace and respond to it are the ones whose lives move with the rhythm of the universe, who have the keys to the kingdom, who truly know how the universe works and their lives show it.*

At the heart of the Bible's vision of the universe is that we live in a world of abundance, where grace upon grace continually pours forth from the generous heart of God. "Our cups runneth over (Psalm 23:5, KJV)." For John Calvin (1509-1564), God is the "font of all goodness," who showers upon his children grace upon grace, and blessing upon blessing, which liberally flows from the bountiful goodness at the core of His being. And because this is how he understood the God of Jesus Christ, the Christian life for Calvin was primarily one of deep, heartfelt, joyous gratitude. This is at the core of what it means to be Presbyterian. It was Calvin's theological heir, Karl Barth (1886-1968), writing in the last century, who said, "Grace must find expression in life, otherwise it is not grace." The Reformed tradition, indeed, the Presbyterian church as part of this rich tradition, shaped by the witness of Calvin and Barth and countless others give testimony to this powerful truth about what it really means to be Christian – *it's living a life of deep, joyful, gratitude in all areas of our lives. It's all about grace and gratitude.*³

³ See Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin, also by Barth, "Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lighting."

When we encounter this grace, we respond with thanksgiving. The more we fathom the depths of such grace, the more thankful we become. The more we truly fathom the generosity of God toward us, the more generous we become. The more we acknowledge the manifold gifts God has given us and realize that everything we have flows from the goodness of God, the more we then wish to be even more generous with our gift giving. Grace yields gratitude which yields more grace. We discover that the more we give, the more we get back in other gifts, maybe especially joy. That's the cycle of grace and gratitude. That's just the way it is. It's not something we have to do but *want* to do. We break out with praise, with thanksgiving, and respond in unexpected ways – like the Samaritan leper.

This is the theological basis for Christian stewardship. Christians have always been generous people because we know we have been blessed by a generous God. Christians are grateful people because we are the recipients of God's grace. We want to do more than what's expected of us, more than the bare minimal requirements; we want to break out and do the unexpected. Maybe it's why Paul said God loves a joyful giver, with the Greek here being closer to hilarious, a hilarious giver who overflows with joy and gives (2 Corinthians 9:7).

This is a generous gathering of Christians, blessed by God in countless ways. We have all received our pledge cards in the mail and a thoughtful letter written by Peter Green, chair of the Stewardship Committee. Be sure to look at the Stewardship bulletin board in fellowship hall. We are entering a season of thanksgiving both in the culture and in this church as we move toward Commitment Sunday on the 28th October, Reformation Sunday. Maybe you've already sent in your pledge card or already know what your commitment will be for next year. Maybe you haven't given much thought to it. Maybe you'll keep it about the same, maybe bump it up a little. But I encourage you to wait before making a decision or if you already made a decision, to reconsider. Take this time over the next couple of weeks leading up to the 28th to take stock of your life, of your blessings, maybe literally count them, listing them all. Take stock of the manifold expressions of God's grace in your life, listen to your heart, and prayerfully consider how to respond with proportional gratitude. One of the ways, certainly not the only way, yet a crucially important way we express our gratitude to God is financially, with our resources – which are really God's resources, not ours. We are giving back to God what was given to us by God.

Let this be a season of discernment, of prayer. Before we made our pledge commitment to the Capital Campaign two years ago, we did exactly this – we entered into a season of discernment, of prayer. We took stock of our lives, of our gifts, and we asked God to lead us, to open up our hearts and our checkbooks and respond in a joyful way. We know the response was great.

How has God been generous to you and your family and what kind of response is the Spirit leading you to make? Or to bringing it a little closer to home, how has God been generous to you through the ministry of Catonsville Presbyterian Church? Where or in whom have you witnessed the grace and healing presence of Christ in and through this community? Where do you see God at work through us? What is your response? What does this ministry mean to you? Identify the grace, then give with gratitude.

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