

*Love that springs from gratitude is the essence of faith.*

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor

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13 October 2013 — Pentecost 21

*Luke 17:11-19*

Over the last week couple of weeks I have had two starkly different experiences. One experience involved David and I cleaning out our water tanks at the house at the coast. We have three 10,000 litre underground tanks that had recently been drained of their water by our next-door neighbour for her new swimming pool. That meant they were now empty and we could give them a good clean. So for a whole afternoon I was up and down out of concrete tanks bucketing muddy water and cleaning. It was cold, dark and hard work. I was beneath the ground, covered in mud from top to toe and exhausted by the end.

The second experience was very different. This time at the coast during the supermarket shopping I bought a cheap kite, a butterfly kite. The next day I put it together and had a wonderful few hours flying my pretty kite. I walked along the beach in my sarong with the sunlight on my back holding my kite string and watching it gently swoop and glide in the breeze. It was a perfect afternoon. Now of those two experiences, the muddy hard work in cold dark concrete and the kite flying in the warm spring weather, I was certainly much happier during the second and I was vastly more grateful. Yet... I don't think I expressed gratitude once. In one circumstance I was feeling too sorry for myself to feel gratitude. In the other I was blissfully up in the clouds to notice how privileged I was.

The sentence for the beginning of Wednesday morning prayer in our prayer book is from 1 Thessalonians, "*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.*" I sometimes think this verse is like a Zen koan. It takes some pondering to try and make any sense of it. How can you rejoice without ceasing?

How can you pray without ceasing? How can you give thanks in everything? I tell you in that muddy tank I was not rejoicing, I wasn't giving thanks and the only time I was praying was when I was waiting for David to bring back the ladder so I could get out.

So often we only make conscious contact with God when we need something. Once we have it we become distracted and go our merry way again. Sometimes we can only see one part of our life, usually a difficult or uncomfortable part, and we do not notice all the things that are a blessing.

The story of Jesus and the ten lepers is a story about noticing, about praying, rejoicing and giving thanks. The only one of the ten who did all of that was the Samaritan leper, a person who was a double outcast — once for his disease and again for being a religious heretic and foreigner.

The heart of the story unfolds in three steps: 1. the healing, 2. the turning back and praising God (literally *glorifying God*), 3. the prostration and thanksgiving at Jesus' feet.

Ten are healed. Only one comes back to praise and give thanks. Yet all ten were obedient to what Jesus asked. When they cried out to him from a safe distance, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us", he sends them away to the priests. According to the religious law the priests were the ones who decided if a person suffering from a leprous disease was healed and could be readmitted to the community. The ten lepers obey Jesus and as they obey they are healed. However, only one comes back. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her beautiful sermon on this text, agrees that the nine were fulfilling expectations and doing their duty by obeying the Law. She writes that, "Ten behaved like good lepers, good Jews; only one, a double loser, behaved like

a man in love.” This man comes back praising—glorifying God—and expresses his gratitude. This verb for *thank* is the one used when Jesus thanks God for the bread and cup at the last supper. It is the basis for our word *Eucharist*.

Jesus response affirms what the Samaritan leper has done. He asks, “Were there not ten made clean? Where are the other nine?” He points out that it was a foreigner who comes back to praise and give thanks. And finally Jesus says to the Samaritan prostrate with thanksgiving at his feet, “... your faith has made you well.” In the Greek it is literally your faith has saved you.” Jesus addresses the same phrase to the woman at the anointing (7:50), the haemorrhaging woman (8:48), and the blind beggar (18:42).

This story is about how we respond or do not respond to God’s grace and blessing. The Samaritan gets it right when he notices that God is at work in Jesus, in the way God’s grace and mercy are available to all, including the outcast, those who are not noticed by others. The Samaritan gets it right when he praises God, glorifies God for the wondrous gift he has been given. He gets it right when he falls down with heartfelt, humble gratitude and offers thanks. All these actions are the manifestation of faith that *makes well*, as the NRSV puts it here. And this seems to come easiest to the people who have received most from Jesus, the ones who are otherwise ignored, scorned, untouched. As Jesus observes in the case of the anointing woman (7:47), the one who has been given much also loves greatly. Love that springs from gratitude is the essence of faith.

This is why expressing gratitude is transforming practice. It literally shifts reality. It changes our attitudes and the way we see the world. It not only is the correct response to the grace, mercy and love of God, it is the state of mind and heart that opens us up to love and goodness more and more. Psychologists have now recognized the transformative quality of gratitude. Oprah Winfrey has a page on her website about it apparently. Yet for centuries all the great spiritual and religious traditions have known about the power of gratitude. The great spiritual teachers, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed and others, have taught that we should count our blessings. The wisdom behind this is that our mind is a magnet and we gravitate towards what we think about the most. St Paul knew it 2,000 years ago when he wrote those seemingly impossible words, *rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks*.

I don’t know why the other nine lepers did not come back to Jesus and say thank you. Perhaps they were so excited by their circumstances they couldn’t wait to have it confirmed by the priests. Perhaps they didn’t have time, had better things to do or felt that they simply got what was their due. They had a right to be fit and well and it had finally happened. Perhaps they thought they did not owe anyone anything, even a simple thanks.

Yet here is the thing: we cannot wait until we feel gratitude to express gratitude. If we depend on our feelings to give thanks and experience the wholeness that comes we will be always be enslaved to our hormones, or our circumstances, or what someone said or didn’t say, did or didn’t do. Instead gratitude, like unconditional love, is a choice we make. It is a practice we undertake and a state of mind we cultivate, no matter where we are — in a concrete hole in the ground, flying a kite at the beach, working at the computer at work, standing at the sink doing the dishes. May we notice God’s blessings and give praise and thanksgiving. Amen.