

“Grateful: The Struggle”
Luke 17:11-19

As we begin this sermon series on being grateful, I find it ironic to be thinking of gratitude when life seems to be unbearably difficult right now for my family. We are facing a combination of a brother with a serious stage 4 aggressive brain cancer, a mother with advanced cervical cancer, and a sister with at least stage 3 breast and lymph nodes cancer. I am here on the East Coast, while they are in California. My sister in Dubai can't seem to get a visa to be able to come to the US to help. All of these circumstances do not seem to fit all that well with a sermon series focusing on being grateful. How could one be grateful in the midst of suffering or when one is facing violence, a pandemic, war, or pain? Gratitude is often associated with abundance. There is even a whole line of theology known as prosperity theology which proclaims that God's blessings are about getting the things we want in life. What is often forgotten in that way of faith is that life is hard and challenging, even for the wealthiest among us. No one escapes illness, broken relationships, abuse, and other sufferings. Many people around the world barely make it due to poverty, war, or lack of access to basic medical care. If gratitude is connected to life going well, then gratitude is a quid pro quo transaction. It becomes a duty and a moral obligation rather than a deep heart matter, a grace that flows out of our hearts.

In today's Bible story we hear about a deep sense of gratitude that becomes an example for others. This is often known as the healing of the Ten Lepers. In this story, we often malign the 9 lepers who were healed because they didn't come back to Jesus to thank him. This is because we think of transactional kind of gratitude. But if we pay attention to the details of the story, we hear about a deeper kind of gratitude. The one man who came back to give thanks was a foreigner, a Samaritan. This is the key here because Jews and Samaritans did not like each other.

The Samaritans were considered resident aliens in the land and represented to the Jews the accommodation and compromise of the Jews who married foreigners and followed the religions of other nations. The origin of the Samaritans goes back to 740 BCE when the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians deported most of the leading families and skilled workers out of the country and sent them into exile in various places throughout their empire. At the same time, the Assyrians imported into Israel other conquered nations within their empire. The result was that the different people intermarried with the Jews who were left behind. These became the Samaritans. They were Jews who married foreigners and who incorporated into their religion some of the foreign religions of the people they married. That is why there were major frictions between the so-called pure Jews and the ethnically mixed Samaritans. That is why according to Luke 9 the Samaritans were hostile to Jesus who was a pure Jew on his way to a religious festival in Jerusalem and they refused him hospitality which is a major offense in that time and culture. James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, were so upset with the rejection of the Samaritans that they asked Jesus if it was okay to command fire to come down from heaven and consume those Samaritans. Jesus had every logical reason to despise the Samaritans and to consider them as a bad example of faith.

And yet, in this story, we see Jesus lifting up the Samaritan as an example of faith and gratitude. The other 9 went and did what Jesus had told them. They went to the priests to get cleared from this isolation. The priests were the local health department for getting people with skin diseases out of quarantine. They kept track of the religious purity laws and rituals. So the other 9 did nothing wrong. They followed what Jesus commanded them to do. They waited for the religious authorities to give them the clearance. But this one man could not wait. He was the one who would have been the least likely to feel such gratitude to a Jew, but he was the one who felt it deeply in his heart and could not contain himself. Gratitude came from deep within him because he became aware of the deep grace he received. The other nine were putting that excitement on hold until they got things in order first. Their gratitude might have been restrained because of the social and religious expectations they had to deal with.

We can learn from the example of the Samaritan leper about how gratitude works in our lives. Gratitude is about our awareness of the gift of life and our connection to the source of life. It is not about getting things or having things go our way. Diana Butler Bass puts it this way in her book *Grateful*, "Gratitude is the deep ability to embrace the gift of who we are, *that we are*, that in the multibillion-year history of the universe each one of us has been born, can love, grows in awareness, and has a story. Life is the gift. When that mystery fills our hearts, it overwhelms us and a deep river of emotions flows forth -feelings we barely knew we were capable of holding."

Life is the gift, and the invitation of this sermon series is to embrace that! The circumstances of our lives will ebb and flow, but our connection to the source of life will never change. The challenge is living aware of that gift of connection. That is when gratitude becomes a lifegiving force instead of an obligation. The challenge is not finding people in your life who remind you to be grateful for what you have (or to write thank you notes for things or services you get), but people who help you to connect to the giftedness of life. That is what Jesus offered the Samaritan leper, and that is what we offer to each other, and what God restores us to in all the ups and downs of life.

Last Sunday Dr. Jill Biden made a surprise visit to a Baptist church in South Carolina. This was the church that helped her reconnect with her faith and the source of her life after she had lost that sense of connection. After the death of her son Beau, Dr. Biden felt betrayed by God for not answering her prayers. She felt the deep pain of losing someone she loved so dearly. Even when her pastor reached out to her, she ignored his emails. She felt so disconnected for four years. But in 2019, while on the campaign trail, Robin Jackson, the pastor's wife of the church she visited, offered to be her prayer partner. Through that connection, a deeper connection emerged for Dr. Biden. That is why she returned to share her sense of gratitude:

<https://youtu.be/92U26hJYXrA>

In that connection with Robin Jackson, Jill Biden was restored to faith and to the joy of life. In an interview with the PBS NewsHour in August 2020, Biden was asked what she and her prayer partner actually do. "We got in touch. We pray together," was the simple answer. "We text one another a couple of times a week. She gave me back my faith,"

Biden said. Delving deeper on Sunday, Biden quoted scripture saying her renewed belief was possible only because Jackson decided it was time she no longer walked in sadness alone. "We can't heal ourselves alone," Biden said. "Robin's kindness, her mercy and grace, pushed past the callouses on my heart. Like a mustard seed, my faith was able to grow once again." Closing her remarks, the following day Biden said that when she came back to her faith, and decided to believe in God again, she learned, "We not only find mercy, we find each other." Amen.