

"Walking in Gratitude"
Luke 17:11-19
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Cottage Grove United Church of Christ
Cottage Grove, Minnesota
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Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

I once had an extraordinary experience during my year as a hospital chaplain resident in San Francisco. While making my rounds, I came across a patient whose medical chart listed her age as 109! Upon speaking with the nurses about the patient, however, I was *deeply disappointed* to learn that the listed age was a mistake. She was *only* 102!

The patient was being treated for pneumonia, a disease that can kill people decades younger than her. However, when I knocked on the door of her room and entered, I discovered a woman who had *not a care in the world!* Her hearing was fine, her mind was sharp as a tack, and when I inquired about her spiritual needs, it was clear that the pneumonia was not bothering her a whit. Sure, she was ill and in the hospital. But more important to her was the fact that she was *alive*. She was cheerful, did not appear to be in any distress, and I spent the visit listening to her stories -- all of which were presented with tremendous *thankfulness* for the life she was living.

Despite her demeanor, I cannot imagine that this woman's life had always been easy. She was well into adulthood by the time of the Great Depression. She was nearing middle age by the time World War II hit. She was African American and was in her mid-60's by the time of the Civil Rights movement. She was a woman who lived long before the woman's movement and who had undoubtedly endured sexism, racism, and for many years now, agism.

As I recall, she had never married and had no children, but by 102 she had experienced the deaths of many family members and friends. She was relatively healthy -- even with the pneumonia -- but she had doubtless endured physical ailments, or witnessed the illnesses of loved ones, in the past. In short, she had endured *102 years of life*, and she was now in the hospital with a dangerous illness. Nonetheless, she was *happy, thankful, and strong in her faith*. She was the Samaritan 10th leper of this morning's scripture, so grateful to have made it this far, and to be doing as well as she was. She was the one to turn back, at every chance she got, and praise God with every breath she had.

How often are we so thankful? Life is painful, as it was for those ten lepers, and as it surely was for that 102-year-old woman in the hospital bed. There are times when gratitude seems like a joke, when it is all we can do to take a bitter breath, or when we dutifully say our prayers of thanks, and perhaps even *mean* them, ...at least until the *next* blow hits us, and we fall once more.

Those lepers had it hard all-around. As lepers, they were forced to leave their families and communities, quarantined for fear of contagion, and because they were considered unclean. Lepers would often gather into communities of their own and wait at the edges of cities, begging whatever scraps a charitable traveler might throw in their direction. They were at the bottom-most rung of society, outcasts in the deepest sense.

Then there was their *disease* -- or diseases. The "lepers" who appear in our Bible actually suffered from a *variety* of contagious diseases, rather than the specific disease of "leprosy," which we now refer to as Hansen's disease. Thus, they experienced all sorts of physical suffering, with very little hope of cure or healing.

They were the AIDS patients of today, or perhaps more accurately, the AIDS patients of a few years ago, when that disease carried with it even *more* social stigma than it does now. Physically ill, with little hope of relief; emotionally distraught, having to leave the life they had once known; socially stigmatized, as outcasts; forced to beg on the outskirts of the city, unable to enter.

Then, *along came Jesus*. This community of ten lepers approached him cautiously and kept their distance, as required by law and tradition. But perhaps they had heard that he was a healer. Their *hearts fluttered*, their hopes rose -- or at least the kind of feeble hope that the downtrodden can muster, after too many "no's," too many rejections. They were the cancer patient trying yet another experimental drug. "Will *this* one work? Well, why not? I suppose it's worth a shot."

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" they found the energy to cry. And then the miracle. Jesus told them to go to the Jewish priests, as required by religious law. And as they walked... they were made clean. As they walked, their sores disappeared, their aching bones felt no pain, their disease vanished.

Nine of the ten kept going. And why not?! After years of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual suffering, *they were made clean!* They were like a paralyzed person suddenly able to walk again. Jumping and skipping -- after so many years unable to move -- they could run to their

families, they could be allowed into the gates of the city, they could feel whole again.

...But then there was the tenth leper, the most downtrodden of all. Not only was he a *leper*; he was a *Samaritan*. Not only was he quarantined by virtue of his disease; he was the brunt of racism, by virtue of his Samaritan heritage. Even if he experienced the physical cure of his disease, he did not face an easy life. He was still an outcast. His life was still threatened.

And yet, *this* was the man who turned around on his way into the city, and who began praising God with a loud voice. *This* was the man who took the time to thank Jesus. And *this* was the man who was not only cured of his disease -- with the first century “chemotherapy” of a miracle healer. This was the man who was made whole, who was healed body and spirit.

What causes us to be grateful... or ungrateful? Clearly, it does not always have to do with our situation in life. A 102-year-old woman with pneumonia cries, “*Thank you!*” from her hospital bed, and “the least of these” among ten lepers praises God and is healed. We have all experienced and endured times of pain in our lives: personal illness, the illness or death of a loved one, broken relationships... the list goes on. So, how can we become like that 102-year-old woman, or like the Samaritan whose body was healed but whose life would remain uneasy? How can we learn to praise God every step of the difficult way?!

We can do so in part by taking stock of our blessings. Today we, the members of Cottage Grove United Church of Christ, will have an opportunity to play “healer” to people in need, through the Neighbors in Need special offering and through the CROP Hunger Walk. We may never hear direct thanks from the people we will “heal,” through our offerings and activism. But by taking part in Neighbors in Need and the CROP Walk we will be expressing our *own* gratitude for the blessings we have received. By participating in these events we will be praising God that we have enough that we can give some away. We will be thanking God that we have the physical ability to join in a walk for people who are too hungry to do so. We will be following Jesus’ footsteps by caring for the outcast, the broken down, the hurting, even as we will be following in the footsteps of the Samaritan and that 102-year-old woman, singing, “Praise God!”

Now let us pray.