

GROUNDED IN GRATITUDE

Luke 17:11-19

*We are grateful for the witness of the saints,
and it shows in our stewardship.*

A sermon preached by
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There was a woman down in Galveston, Texas, who had a beautiful singing parakeet named Chippie. She loved her parakeet and took very good care of it. One day she was cleaning Chippie's birdcage with a canister vacuum cleaner, the kind with the metal tube that has all the attachments. She was cleaning out the bottom of the cage with the bare tube when the phone rang. Without thinking, she turned her head to pick up the phone while still vacuuming the cage. Suddenly she heard the horrible sound of Chippie being sucked up into the vacuum cleaner! Slamming down the phone, she ripped open the vacuum bag and found Chippie in there, stunned but still alive.

Since the bird was covered with dust and dirt, she grabbed it, ran to the bathroom, turned on the faucet and held the bird under the water to clean it off. Then she saw the hair dryer lying beside the sink. So she turned that on and held the poor bird in front of the blast of hot air to dry him off.

A few days later, the woman was sharing with a friend about the incident, and the friend asked, "So how's Chippie doing now?"

The woman said, "Well, Chippie doesn't sing much any more. He just sort of sits and stares."¹

Have you ever felt like Chippie must have felt—sucked down the tubes of life, drowned with cares, blasted with the hot air of your enemies? We've all had days or weeks or years like that, haven't we? There are times when life gets so tough that you just sort of sit and stare and wonder what is going to hit you next. Sometimes it's hard to feel grateful at all, isn't it, when your life is full of trouble and heartache and grief and struggle.

But then something will happen, and it reminds you that life is good. You are blessed beyond measure. There is so much to be grateful for.

Roy Larsen was a man in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, who was going downtown to get a haircut one day. The only problem, or so he thought, was how to maneuver his electric wheelchair. It was a loaner, because his usual ride was in the shop, and he wasn't totally familiar with it. But that soon became the least of his problems.

As he was crossing the railroad tracks on Main Street, one of the chair's wheels became lodged in the track. As Larsen struggled to free the wheel, something went wrong with the chair's electrical system, and the chair refused to move at all.

Suddenly the lights on the railroad crossing began to flash, and the signal bells started to ring. The gates in front of Larsen and behind him began to lower. A train was coming, and Roy was caught in the tracks!

A man named Mark Bade was walking down the street and saw Roy Larsen in distress. So he sprinted to Larsen's side and began to struggle with the chair. At almost the same moment, Don Burgeson had stopped his car at the railroad crossing and saw what was happening. He leaped out of his car and helped Bade wrench the chair free from the track and drag it out of harm's way.

As they stepped off the tracks, the three men looked up, and the train was less than 20 yards away, horn blaring and brakes screeching. As it went past them, they just stood there speechless.

Later Larsen told a reporter, "After the train went by, I just said thanks. The only reason I am here today is because these two guys saved my life."² Sometimes things happen that remind us how thankful we need to be.

Do you think the 10 lepers were living with a sense of gratitude? I doubt it. Their lives were nothing but suffering and trouble. Leprosy in ancient times was a debilitating and incurable disease affecting the skin and extremities. In addition to the

physical suffering of the disease, persons afflicted with leprosy were shut out of normal community with other people. They were considered unclean both physically and spiritually. Lepers usually lived together, apart from their families, on the outskirts of towns, begging as their only means of survival. I'm sure gratitude was not one of their strong points.

But then Jesus happened. Traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem for his encounter with the cross, Jesus met ten lepers on the road. They cried out to Jesus for mercy, and he told them to go show themselves to the priest in town. This was what the Law required for a leper to be declared healed. On the way, the lepers felt their disease going away. They were being healed. They were clean.

Presumably all 10 of the lepers were happy they were healed, but only one was thankful. One guy began to shout his praise to God and came back to Jesus and threw himself at the Lord's feet and thanked him profusely. Then Jesus noticed—this guy was a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans didn't associate. Maybe in the leper colony the distinction didn't matter so much. So this man had two strikes against him; he had leprosy, and he was a Samaritan. Yet he was the one who came back to thank Jesus. After making a remark about the nine presumably Jewish lepers not coming back to thank God, Jesus told the Samaritan, "*Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*"³

This is interesting because the Samaritan had no faith—or at least not the right faith—before Jesus came along. Samaritans were considered heretics by the Jews. He also had leprosy. But now he was clean. The word Jesus uses there means not only "well," but "whole" and "saved." It's the same word Jesus would use with the tax collector Zacchaeus a little further down the road: "*Today salvation has come to this house.*"⁴ The Samaritan leper's

healing went far deeper than his skin; through Jesus, his soul was well. And he was grateful.

All of us have reasons to be grateful. Our blessings are not that hard to count. Today especially, we are grateful for our saints, our loved ones who have passed into God's Kingdom. I love this Sunday every year when we look back and think about the ones who are no longer with us but who will never leave us. Those names we read a few minutes ago, those faces we see in the folder—how thankful we are for who they were and what they did and how they loved us.

But today stretches far beyond this past year. Think of the millions and millions of faithful souls who have passed on to glory. They are what the letter to the Hebrews calls the “*cloud of witnesses*.”⁵ They surround us and give us courage and strength while we continue our journey toward heaven.

I was reading this week in our FUMC history book called “A Journey In Faith.” This time a century ago First Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had just been formed by a merger between two congregations, First and Central, who had outgrown their buildings. There was much to be thankful for. The Great War (WWI) had ended. The great flu epidemic had subsided. The Methodists in Fort Smith planned to build a new sanctuary and later an education building on a new site at 15th and B Streets. The church budget in 1917 was a little over \$6,000 annually. The new church with furnishings cost about \$200,000. Those saints undertook a project 33 times their annual budget to provide a house of God for the worship of the Methodists that we are still using today. That is amazing vision and extravagant generosity!

Gratitude often inspires stewardship. God has blessed us in so many ways. We are grateful. As a sign of gratitude, we want to give thanks to God. So we give our financial gifts to support the

life-changing ministry of the church. Or we give our time and energy to get involved in some ministry of the church. Or we do both. When we give our gifts and serve in ministry, God continues to bless us, and we continue to give and serve. Our life becomes an upward spiral of discipleship. It's like Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, "*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.*"⁶

The thanksgivings we return to God through our giving and our serving make a difference. They make a difference in the church, in the community, in the lives of people who are touched by our ministry, and in the life of the one who gives and serves out of gratitude. I believe the Samaritan leper experienced something that day that the other nine did not. When he came back and thanked Jesus for his healing, Jesus took the experience to a deeper level. He said, "*Your faith has made you well.*" But he meant much more than physical healing. In this experience of healing, the Samaritan had found faith. He had come to know Jesus. He had experienced salvation.

I guess we can be grateful for things on a superficial level. We can be happy when things go well. We can feel lucky that we have the things that make for a good life. But we are more than lucky. We are blessed. These things we have, these people we love, this church that means so much, are not coincidences. They are gifts, and out of a deep gratitude to God for these gifts, we respond by giving and by serving. And that just makes us more thankful.

The late Henri Nouwen was one of the great spiritual writers of the 20th century and a professor at Harvard Divinity School. But in 1982, he spent a year in a very different kind of environment.

He did a sabbatical in the poverty-stricken plains of Bolivia and Peru in South America. Out of that experience came a book of reflections called *Gracias*, which of course is the Spanish word for “thanks.” Listen to these lines out of the conclusion of that book:

The word that I kept hearing everywhere I went was *gracias*. ...I saw thousands of poor and hungry children, I met many young men and women without money, a job, or a decent place to live. I spent long hours with sick, elderly people, and I witnessed more misery and pain than ever before in my life. But in the midst of it all, that word that I kept hearing lifted me again and again to a new realm of seeing and hearing: “*Gracias!* Thanks!”

In many of the families I visited nothing was certain, nothing predictable, nothing totally safe. Maybe there would be food tomorrow, maybe there would be work tomorrow, maybe there would be peace tomorrow. Maybe, maybe not. But whatever is given—money, food, work, a handshake, a smile, a good word, or an embrace—is reason to rejoice and say *gracias*...

And slowly I learned. ...I learned that everything that is, is freely given by the God of love. All is grace. Light and water, shelter and food, work and free time, children, parents, and grandparents, birth and death—it is all given to us. Why? So we can say *gracias*, thanks: to God, to each other, to all and everyone.⁷

Today as we come to the Table, our hearts are full; we are grounded in gratitude. We are grateful for the faithful disciples who have gone before us. We feel them with us—the communion of the saints. We feel the spiritual connection of thankfulness. If we are well, if we are whole, if we are saved—it’s only the gift of a gracious God. In return, we want to respond—to give, to serve,

to make a difference in our world, to glorify the Giver. And say
“*Gracias a Dios*. Thanks be to God.” Amen.

¹ From a sermon by Dr. Norman Neaves.

² Cindy Urrea, "Instant Action, Instant Heroes," *The Sun* (9-28-01).

³ Luke 17:19.

⁴ Luke 19:10

⁵ Hebrews 12:1-2.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 9:11-12.

⁷ Henri Nouwen, *Gracias: A Latin American Journal* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 187.