

Proper 23C 2016 David Lose, Sermon: “Gratitude and Grace”

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

I share with you today some reflections on our Gospel by Professor David Lose. Most of the sermon is verbatim from Dr. Lose.*

“How are you?”

It’s a kind of throw-away question that we ask someone upon greeting them. “Hey, Joe! How are ya?” The most common *answers* are usually throw-away *answers*, also. “Fine.” “Pretty good.” “Great!” “Hangin’ in there.” Little is divulged about how the person truly is; and little is expected.

David Lose tells of a colleague of his who, whenever David would ask him, “How are you?” would respond, “I’m grateful.”

“I’m grateful.”

Dr. Lose writes:

It took me by surprise. Not just the first or second time, but almost every time. Eventually, of course, I wasn’t so much *surprised* as I was *struck* by the simplicity and power of this statement. It wasn’t the answer I expected...

‘I’m grateful.’ My colleague chose her words with care. She wanted to make a point. That gratitude is not only a response to good fortune but also a *choice* we make. Certainly that’s true of the leper in today’s Gospel reading. Ten were healed. Ten, no doubt, were surprised at this discovery. Perhaps some were overjoyed. Perhaps some celebrated. Perhaps others ran to tell their family and friends. Perhaps a few even took it for granted. Who knows? What we do know is that one of them not only felt thankful but decided to actually give voice to those emotions, to express his gratitude to Jesus and to God. Gratitude [can indeed be] a *response* to the blessings of life; but it [can also be] a **choice** to *see*

those blessings [and some may be hard to see at first; to see them,] name them, and express our gratitude in word and deed.

And giving voice to gratitude is a choice with consequences, for as we express our gratitude, we affect those around us, even shape the reality in which we live. We reveal, and enable, the Kingdom of God.

Think about it. Gratitude is not the only emotion we might choose to express in response to the events of any given day. There are *reasons* for gratitude, yes, and **also** reasons for fear, anger, frustration, grief, regret, apprehension. Each and all of these colors our experience, makes its appearance on the stage of our lives, and perhaps each has a place and role to play from time to time. But we *choose* how much ‘stage time’ to grant each of these emotions by giving them expression, and as we do so we give them power in our lives.

And that’s what’s key: we are making choices. We may feel a range of emotions in response to all kinds of circumstances and situations, but we choose which emotions to give expression. When confronted by someone who is angry, do we respond with anger as a form of self-protection or do we choose empathy, trying to understand the emotions of the other, and gratitude that the person was willing to be honest? When we are set back in some endeavor at school or work [or home], do we express frustration? or a resolve to keep at it and gratitude for what we’ve learned through this setback? These are choices.

A colleague of mine is living with a form of incurable brain cancer. After much treatment and prayer, it has gone into what is called ‘partial remission’ – it is not growing, but it cannot be removed. One day it will grow again and take his life. But not today. And he is not only grateful, but also **shares** that gratitude. I suspect he has moments where he feels bitter or resentful or fearful or any of the other range of emotions that would be completely understandable; but he *chooses* to live gratefully, viewing each day as another gift of grace and giving voice to his gratitude. Manifesting the Kingdom of God in his sphere of influence; while so many of us manifest negativity.

Maybe that seems like a tall order, something beyond the reach of most of us, available only to a few spiritual giants. Or maybe it is a response that, having been practiced over a lifetime, now comes easily to my colleague and could come just as easily to each of us.

Because here’s the thing: gratitude, like all of our *other* options, becomes easier to choose as we practice it. Gratitude, like faith and hope and love and commitment, are not inborn traits that some have and others don’t, but rather gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time. And as you **practice** giving thanks and more frequently share your gratitude, you not only grow in gratitude but create an example for others. More than that, you create a

climate in which it is easier to be grateful and encourage those around you to see the blessings all around us.

“I’m grateful.” Take a moment to scan the headlines and you’ll see how scarce – and how desperately needed – *more* expressions of gratitude are. Accusation, excuses, venting anger – these seem to have hold of our culture. Indeed, we seem to live in the age of complaint, whether shared in person or, increasingly, through the venue of social media. What a powerful response *gratitude* is in these situations.

In this light, saying “I’m grateful” does not simply express our thanksgiving but actually gives voice to a counter-cultural witness that has the power to shape those around us, push back the tide of resentment and complaint that ails us, and make room for a **fresh** appreciation of God’s renewing, saving grace.

What if you and I – members of the Body of Christ in this place – started practicing our gratitude and develop greater thanksgiving-oriented “muscle memory” by responding for the rest of this month to the question, “How are you,” with the simple but powerful reply, “I’m grateful.” There’s more we could do, of course – starting a gratitude list that we review or say aloud each night before we go to bed, for instance. But for now, perhaps just the challenge and encouragement to say “I’m grateful” is enough. It may be surprising to us and to those around us how meaningful this simple practice can be. After I preached this sermon at our Saturday service last night, Shirley Finger came up to me and said, “That’s the way I try to live. My stage of life is a time for gratitude.” My friends, *any* stage of life is a time for gratitude!

I hasten to say, of course, that your particular situation may make this difficult to do at this time. Perhaps you are overwhelmed by grief or loss, for instance, and would have difficulty giving voice to gratitude just now. And that’s okay. It will come. Gratitude is not a command, it’s an invitation, one God never tires of making. God understands; and for the meantime, the rest of us will give thanks in your stead.

But most of us will be perfectly capable of starting this exercise in gratitude, so to get our practice started, let me ask: “How are you?” (“I’m grateful.”) [Do this three times, perhaps at the end of the service, and at the conclusions of the third, make bold to share Jesus’ words, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”]

And after a while, the muscles of gratitude will get stronger, while the muscles of resentment, unforgiveness and revenge atrophy from disuse. The Lord knows our world has enough body-builders whose bulging muscles of hate, negativity and self-righteousness have been exercised to the point of splitting their shirts. Let us exercise the muscles of the Body of Christ, and entice those who are pumped up with self to join our gym of love and service.

AMEN

By the way, How are you?

* <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/10/pentecost-21-c-gratitude-and-grace/>