

The Church of the Transfiguration
The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 17:11-19

Giving Thanks

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Do any of you remember “Miss Manners”? She was a newspaper advice columnist who was quite popular in the 1980s and 1990s. Miss Manners was a modern-day “Dear Abby,” but with a very dry wit – and a bit of an edge.

I recently learned that Miss Manners’ column is still being published. I was excited to discover this, and so I started to read some of her recent columns.

In doing so, I came across an interesting recent exchange between Miss Manners and one of her readers on the topic of writing thank-you notes.

The reader wrote: “What do you do when the duty to write thank-you notes overwhelms any genuine sense of gratitude?” The reader continued, “writing notes for each gift just seems like too much to be done during an already busy phase of life.” The reader ended by saying, “I am most concerned about the task becoming a bitter chore and source of anxiety, crushing any real gratitude.”

Miss Manners replied:

“Gentle Reader: It is clear to Miss Manners that you can, in fact, manage to pen a heartfelt and genuine letter. [Why?] Because you took three paragraphs to insist that your life is busier and more exhausting than those of the people who took the time to give you a present. You will be relieved to hear that a good thank-you letter need only cost you about half that space and energy.”

By the way, I feel compelled to mention that our beloved rector, Fr. John David, is one of the most prolific writers of thank you notes that I know of. He is truly amazing. Whenever I do something to help out the parish, he always takes the time to write me a thank you note. In fact, I suspect that I will get a thank you note for preaching on thank you notes! But I digress.

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Today’s gospel reading is the well-known story about the ten lepers and the one who returned to say thank you. As you know, leprosy is a skin disease, and people who had leprosy were considered to be unclean in ancient Israelite culture. As such, they were treated as social and religious outcasts.

As we heard in today’s reading from the Hebrew Bible, leprosy was feared precisely because it could make anyone unclean – even someone as powerful as Naaman, the great warrior and military commander of the army of Aram. That is why Naaman was so grateful when the prophet Elisha told him to wash himself seven times in the River Jordan and he was cured of his leprosy.

Anyway, we hear in today’s gospel reading that Jesus entered a village and walked by ten lepers. They cried out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Jesus had mercy on them, and so he healed them of their leprosy.

Jesus then told the ten people to go and show themselves to the priests so that they could return to society. Nine of them dutifully followed Jesus' instructions. The tenth one, however, turned back, praised God, fell to the ground, and thanked Jesus.

Jesus wondered out loud, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" Then, Jesus turned to the person who had returned and said, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well."

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For me, today's gospel reading is not just a miracle story about a physical healing. It is also a story about spiritual healing and wholeness. Specifically, the passage shows us how practices of gratitude (such as saying "thank you" or even writing a thank-you note) can help us to recognize the grace that is present in our lives.

What exactly is grace? Well, I like to think about grace as a pure and unmerited gift from God. In other words, grace is not something that we deserve or can even earn. Rather, grace is a gift that we receive simply because we are loved. Period.

Because of this, the only thing we *can* say in response to God's grace is "thank you."

Grace is a pretty countercultural thing if you think about it. We live in a society that values merit. We believe that the more we work, the more we should get. And the less we work, the less we should get. And to be honest, I often find myself caught up in this merit-based way of thinking.

Now I have a confession to make. I love reality competition shows such as "Top Chef" or "Project Runway" or "Dancing With the Stars." Please don't judge me for that. Week after week, the least deserving person is eliminated from the show until only one person is left – and that person is crowned the winner.

But the economy of grace is the complete opposite of this. Whatever we have received from God – whether it is our very lives, or the forgiveness of our sins, or the great gift of salvation through Jesus Christ – has nothing to do with anything that we've done or earned. In fact, spiritual wholeness is the recognition that we are given these riches notwithstanding the fact that we did nothing to deserve them.

In other words, there's no such thing as "Top Christian" or "Project Christianity" or "Dancing with the Christians." What matters is not what we've done or accomplished, or how hard we've worked. What matters is our understanding that we are the recipients of God's grace even though we might be utterly undeserving of such a gift. And that is what spiritual wholeness is all about.

The tenth leper understood that he was the beneficiary of God's grace, and so he took the time to turn back and say "thank you" to Jesus. And because of that act, he became not only physically whole, but also spiritually whole.

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It is said that Martin Luther, the great 16th century reformer, was once asked to describe the nature of true worship. Luther's response was: the tenth leper turning back.

In other words, what you and I are doing here this morning at the Little Church Around the Corner is all about turning back from the flow of our daily lives so that we can say “thank you.” We are not here to earn gold stars or to curry favor with God. Rather, we are here to give thanks for all of the wonderful things that God has done for us.

Things may feel bleak in the outside world – such as the ongoing shutdown of the federal government. But there is much to be thankful for, including the recent designation of Bishop Sarah Mullaly of London as the first female Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1400-year history of the Church of England.

In fact, Fr. John David had a chance to meet with Archbishop-Designate Mullaly this week, along with the other priests of our Diocese who have sister parishes in London.

One last thing. Did you know that “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word for “thanksgiving”? Later, at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer, you will hear me chant: “Let us give *thanks* unto our Lord God.” And you will respond, “It is meet and right so to do.” And even later, during the eucharistic prayer itself, we will ask God to accept “this our sacrifice of praise and *thanksgiving*.” Giving thanks is at the heart of the mass.

I invite you, during today’s eucharistic prayer – and even afterwards – to reflect upon the spirituality of gratitude and how practices of gratitude might lead to spiritual wholeness.

Where do you find God’s grace in your life?

How do you respond to God’s grace?

And what would it look like for you to write a thank-you note to God?