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An Attitude of Gratitude

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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's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine? 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."

Catholic Priest and author Richard Rohr comments that when it comes to an enthusiastic motorcyclist or a listless religious practitioner in measuring closeness to God, the motorcyclist wins every time. Enthusiastic people are people full of energy, people glad to be alive, people who value the beauty of a moment or an experience and are closer to God than those who just go through the motions of religious piety. The word "enthusiast" is by definition "God possessed," that is "en" meaning in and "theos" meaning God. The people who are so full of life they exude gratitude are the people who best witness to the power and grace of God in their daily living.

To be inspired or possessed by a god; to be rapt, to be in ecstasy. rapt: to be completely fascinated by what one is seeing or hearing.

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes (e e cummings, 'collected poems')

I like this story in Luke's gospel better than last week's story. Here is a story of transformation, of healing, of ecstasy, and enthusiasm. These men, ostracized by the community for their disease, and condemned by the religious institution as unclean spiritually, have found new life that they thought they'd never have. It must have created an ecstasy of the highest order when, on their way to the priest, they discovered their bodies restored to complete health. As lepers, they weren't allowed to have contact with other humans—family, friends. There was no hospital or nursing home for them to stay. Only the priest could certify a person clean spiritually and physically healthy.

Let's not be too hasty to condemn the nine who didn't return in gratitude. They were so enthused by their new life, they had to rush home to see their spouse, their children, their neighbors and friends they hadn't seen in months or years. And to show them their new-found healing would have been a remarkable, unthinkable experience that they were wild with enthusiasm.

When the one returned, Jesus commented that he was made whole, which goes beyond physical healing. And we don't know if the others eventually came to Jesus later that day or the next day to express their gratitude, but Luke makes of this one the essence of wholeness: it is complete, spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally. Luke tells us that gratitude does that to a person. It's more about the person giving thanks than the person who is thanked.

Saying Thanks, offering gratitude, an attitude of appreciation does more for us than the person or thing being thanked. The mindset of not taking things for granted makes us more grateful, and therefore whole.

Gratitude is important in the dynamic of giving and receiving. From the giver's side, the act of giving is incomplete until the gift is received and acknowledged. We don't give gifts in order to be thanked, but we do like to know that the receiver received it and at least thanked us for the gesture if not the gift itself. Not every gift per se is welcomed or wanted and is sometimes regifted; gifts are given without strings attached. But a word of thanks completes the gift giving. We give gifts to express our deeper connection with those to whom we give.

C.S. Lewis, the popular author and theologian, wondered as a young man why God was constantly asking for praise for himself? Is God so self-preoccupied, so needy, so insecure that she needs us to keep telling her how great she is? We want God who is people-oriented, not God-centered. But then Lewis observed that if we fail to admire great art, for instance, we have missed something. The art isn't poorer for our refusing to admire it, but we are. When we fail to praise, we are missing something. When we praise God, we connect with God, and God communicates and connects with us. We enjoy one another. We delight in each other. We are enthusiastic—*en theos*, in God.

Lewis thought that Praise seems to be inner health made audible. Praise, thankfulness, enthusiasm is what spontaneously overflows from enjoyment. The world rings with praise, does it not?: lovers adoring one another, readers affirming their favorite poet, walkers admiring the countryside, athletes delighting in their favorite game; praise of good weather, however one defines that; playful children, pretty flowers, magnificent mountains, selfless public servants.

Just as people spontaneously praise what they value, so they spontaneously urge others to join them in praising it: "Isn't she lovely?" "Wasn't that glorious?" "Don't you think that was a splendid maneuver by the quarterback?" "Wasn't the soloist outstanding?" It's like the young man who says to his girlfriend: "You look beautiful, like a goddess, like a model." And she responds: "I don't believe a word of it, but tell me again." Praise and thanks are ways of communicating and sharing mutual admiration and appreciation.

The enjoyment of something is stunted to some degree and hindered if it is never expressed in joyful celebration. Lewis actually thought that praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete until it is expressed. When you read a good book or see a great movie, you want to tell someone how good it is. Gratitude for the discovery, for what it

means to you, is made more intense when you share it with someone whom you know will also enjoy it. The movie or the book is not enhanced by our gratitude but we engage in relationship with another when we share our enthusiasm for it.

When a small group of us journeyed to Turkey, we were astounded at the response one received when one admired something of another. One of our group told one of our guides they admired his necktie, at which point the guide took it off and gave it to the admirer. That's a part of the culture, we were told, though we were cautioned not to overdo it. Sadly, in our own culture, one must be careful how one compliments or admires or praises lest it be construed as having some dark underside to it.

God's effort to elicit our thanks and praise is one of the most loving things God could do for us because of what it does for us and what it teaches us to do for others. When Jesus commended the one healed leper who returned, he was doing him a favor. And of course, we don't know that the other nine didn't at some point seek Jesus out to say thanks, or invite him over for dinner and a drink in appreciation.

Alice Walker, in her book *The Color Purple*, put these words into the mouth of one of her characters in the story:

More than anything else, God loves admiration. You say God is vain? Naw. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it ticks God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

One of the best gifts we can give God and one another and ourselves is to be enthusiastic about life. To say thanks for sunshine and rain alike; to say thanks for the days when we have no pain and to say thanks for the days when pain alerts us to a malady; to say thanks for friends and enemies alike, for each has their place in keeping life balanced and beautiful.

In his book *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel pits a young lad against a Bengal tiger on a small boat lost in the ocean for months. The boy spends his time conjuring ways to keep the tiger on his side of the boat, which is difficult as the tiger gets hungry. But when the journey is done, the boy realizes that the tiger, his enemy, is actually responsible for keeping him alive. Had he not had that nemesis to keep him thinking clearly and always on his toes to keep from being attacked, he would have succumbed to the elements.

So as people of faith, let us give ourselves over to a life of enthusiasm, a life of thanksgiving, an attitude of gratitude that opens our eyes, our ears, our heart to appreciating the world around us and the life we live.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, whose love has been at the very heart of our existence, we gather again to give thanks for the beauty that inspires us each day: for the joy of human love, given and received; for the activities of each day that bring purpose to life and for the quiet of evening rest to renew our bodies, minds and souls; for the response of neighbors when we are in need and for the comfort of caregivers when we are ill.

For the anticipated beauty of autumn that we are already beginning to experience, we offer our gratitude. Pumpkins become decorations reminding us of the harvest of food for the winter, and will soon become jack-o-lanterns for Halloween fun. Trees are tinged in red and gold even as corn and wheat are harvested for our cereal and bread. Nights offer a crisp reminder of the coming hibernation of flowers and wildlife even as the shorter days send us indoors for fireplace and warm meals.

Even as we give thanks for the beauty of nature, we pray you to inspire us to care more diligently for the earth we take for granted, and of which we have been careless for too many generations. Global warming is taking its toll with melting ice caps and rising, warming oceans that spin off hurricanes and tornados, flood and drought alike that destroy life. Give us discerning minds and renewing activities that make for a green earth that we may enjoy its beauty for generations to come.

We give thanks, too, for your presence among us in the difficult days. For those who have lost loved ones and those who struggle with illness, for those who are down and out, for those who are oppressed, for those who are beleaguered by war, and those whose lives have been upended by natural disasters, we pray your spirit to empower them with a holy strength. Bestow peace even in their trauma and be to them the unseen saving grace they need.

Merciful God, because we love our world so much, we pray now for grace to quarrel with it. Give us wisdom enough to take umbrage with those things that run counter to your way and your truth. Give us the willingness to quarrel with the worship of success and power, and with the assumption that people are less important than the bottom line. Give us courage to quarrel with a culture that tends to exploit rather than satisfy the needs of people. Give us courage to quarrel with those who pledge allegiance to one race rather than to the human race. Give us wisdom to know what messages we can trust, as we are bombarded with newspapers, television and magazines, and fake news that are more interested in selling than informing accurately.

We pray that we may be good citizens of this world as well as your kingdom; that we may be servants of love more than brokers of success; that we may be part of your body of justice and peace in all we do and say. In the name of the Christ, amen.