

A Sermon by the Reverend John McDuffie
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, October 13, 2019

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

It is a joy to be with you this morning. I'm grateful for the time I will have to be among you at Christ Church, and I'm grateful to Fr. Tim for his kind invitation to join the clergy staff. I mention being grateful because the subject of gratitude is at the heart of today's Gospel lesson.

When I hear this story of Jesus healing the ten lepers and seeing only one of them return to praise God and to thank him for his healing, I typically think about the other nine and say to myself, "What a miserable group of ungrateful wretches!" And only then do I realize that often I behave in exactly the same way as they did. Many times in my life I have found myself in the midst of an unsettling situation, or a crisis, or a problem that seemed impossible to resolve, and I have prayed to almighty God with fervent petitions, intercessions, supplications...only to find that when the crisis was over and the problem faded away, I would then take a vacation from God and fail to follow up with a hearty word of thanks for seeing me through the storm. Instead, I would return to a cultural expectation of being privileged and self-sufficient. Have any of you had that experience as well?

There are many and various ways to pray, and I believe that the prayer of thanksgiving is often the least employed—even though the great spiritual masters will tell us that thanksgiving is the highest, and purest form of prayer. "All life is a gift", one of my most enlightened spiritual companions once said to me. When I used to preside at the mid-day Wednesday liturgy at my old parish, I invariably noticed that when we shared the Prayers of the People, there were many petitions and intercessions offered aloud—for people suffering from illness, for the health of the nation, for the victims of violence and natural disasters, and petitions for personal strength and healing. But when we were invited to give thanks to God for

all the blessings of this life, there was often a stony silence. I would offer a few thanksgivings for a beautiful day, or for the strength of the gathered community—but then more silence. At last one of my parishioners, whose name was Chris, would offer words of thanks. It was significant to me that Chris had spent the better part of ten years of his life in a psychiatric hospital, and that he still suffered from a serious form of emotional illness. But he would say simple things, like, “I’m thankful for my parents and my family”; or, “I’m thankful that my roommate has enough money to pay his share of the rent this month”; or, especially in October, “I’m thankful for baseball!” (More on that in a moment)

I’ve often found that people who have weathered serious adversity in life, either of a chronic or of a short-term nature, have much to teach me about praying with gratitude. Years ago I attended a conference on the liturgy of the Holy Eucharist (“eucharist”, of course, is from the Greek word meaning “thanksgiving”), and I recall a story told to us by the Very Rev. Alan Jones, the conference leader, who at that time was the dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. He mentioned a good friend who was a Vietnam War veteran. This man served in two tours of duty during the war. He was in country most of each tour, endured some of the most savage combat moments of the war, and said that there were things that happened over there that he could never mention or discuss with people back home. But he told Dean Jones that he had a simple prayer of thanksgiving that he uttered to God each day. Upon awakening to a new morning, and realizing that he had survived to see another day, he simply said: “I’m awake...I’m alive...I win.” I took that story and shared it with one of my parishioners at the time, a retired Army Green Beret officer who had also been through harrowing times of combat in Vietnam, and who rarely smiled. When I told him of that prayer, he suddenly smiled at me and said, “Yes! That’s it! We’re awake, we’re alive, we’re winners!”

Sometime ago another parishioner of mine taught me much about thanksgiving. Her name was Stephanie. She had a rich career as a registered nurse, and worked for a long time in Asia, including a span of over ten years throughout India, which included time with Mother Theresa and the Sisters of the Poor in Calcutta. Stephanie came to my church with the diagnosis of an incurable form of cancer. She had endured chemotherapy and radiation therapy, and now was receiving palliative care for her illness. What I encountered was a soul rich with gratitude,

who was unafraid and was ready to meet God face to face. Her favorite verse in scripture was, “Knock and the door shall be opened unto you.”

One day I went to visit Stephanie at her home, because she was too weak to come to church that Sunday. She warmly greeted me at the door, and we sat in her living room to have a cup of tea together. “How are you today?”, I asked her. Stephanie responded with a radiant smile and said, “Today is a good day! I can stand up, and I’m not dizzy! I can sit here and enjoy a cup of tea with you, and not be nauseated! I can read a book today and not have a splitting headache!”

That was one of the greatest thanksgiving prayers I have ever heard. Gratitude for simple things...things that you and I may well take for granted each day...but our lives are made up of simple things, and—all life is a gift.

What would it be like for us if when people asked us, “How are you?”, we could respond with, “I’m grateful!” And in cultivating a deeper heart of gratitude, could we in turn help to make the world a better place? Notice the end of today’s Gospel reading. When Jesus acknowledges the gratitude of the lone Samaritan, he doesn’t invite him to stay there and keep returning thanks to him. Instead, he says, “Go on your way. Your faith has made you well.” I take that as an invitation to turn thanksgiving into “thanksgiving”—to share Christ’s healing presence with others. I’m convinced that simple gratitude is the means of helping us to engage the world in a new and different way. I’m reminded of the immortal words of the great American poet Mary Oliver, who says this in her poem, “When Death Comes”:

*When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement,
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it is over, I don’t want to wonder
If I have made of my life something particular, and real.*

*I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
Or full of argument.*

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

In closing, let me return to an important subject, which is baseball. In October, let's give thanks for baseball! And let's get our Natitude on! The Nationals could go to the World Series! The other night, when I was watching the Nationals play the Dodgers, Ryan Zimmerman came up to bat and hit a three-run home run! Mr. Zimmerman is one who has struggled with physical adversity this season. I had tears of joy, and I went and did something that my wife Mary tells me not to do, because it could jinx the team. I put on the music of Chuck Brown, the godfather of DC go-go music. I listened as Chuck sang "I feel like bustin' loose, bustin' loose!" (This song sometimes gets played at Nationals Park when one of our guys hits a home run.) But what really touched me was the song that followed on my playlist, another Chuck Brown song entitled "Beautiful Life." It is a song of thanksgiving. Listen to part of the lyrics:

So ain't no need for stress

We don't worry about the things we can't control

We just pray and hope for the best.

You don't need a whole lot of money

You don't need no fancy car

You ain't got to be famous or a movie star

Just be happy with who you are.

You got some food on the table and a

Place to live and that's a beautiful life...

You got somebody you can love,

Family and some kids and that's a beautiful life...

You got money in your pocket just to

Pay your bills and that's a beautiful life...

Just to make it through the struggle and

You still be here, now that's a beautiful life.

It's a beautiful life. We're awake, we're alive, we win. And may we feel so much gratitude that we can share it with others. Amen.